

STAR WARS

THE SHADOW WAR

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A while back I had an idea for a Star Wars political thriller that answers one of the post-RotJ EU's lingering questions of how the hell Borsk Fey'lya got elected head of the New Republic. The result is *The Shadow War*, a knotty tale of conspiracy and betrayals woven from the Star Wars Legends fabric.

I held off posting the novel when I finished it in 2019 for several reasons. Its focus on politicking and subterfuge is pretty different from standard SW fare, and the main cast is mostly an assemblage of OCs and more obscure EU characters. I was also afraid (god help me) that people would think I was riffing on then-current American politics. Plus it's got a downer ending, even when pre-ordained by the premise.

But I've gotten requests from different people to see it and have decided to oblige. It's mostly the same book as I wrote in 2019, but I cut out some filler and tucked some loose ends. So for anyone interested in a non-standard SW thriller that weaves together all sorts of minute threads from the Legends canon, or is interested in a 'lost' HandofThrawn45 story, here you go.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

NEW REPUBLIC SENATE

Leia Organa Solo, President of the Senate
Ponc Gavrisom, Minister of State
Behn-Kihl-Nahm, Senator from Bavinyar
Borsk Fey'lya, Senator from Kothlis
Avan Beruss, Senator from Illodia
Celch Dravvad, Senator from Corellia
Pwoe, Senator from Mon Calamari

NEW REPUBLIC MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE

Etahn A'Baht, general
Feylis Ardele, quartermaster corps
Ejagga Pakkpekatt, NRI operative

ON BAVINYAR

Jadesei Syne, politician
Pedric Cuf, Bavinyar Independence League agent
Harbin Kaice, general, Bavinyar Defense Forces
Korr-Mad-Narr, chief, Bavinyar Security Agency
Sham-Vi-Diin, investigator, Bavinyar Security Agency
Aryon Ven, investigator, Bavinyar Security Agency

CIVILLIANS

Iella Wessiri Antilles, retired NRI operative
Kenth Hamner, Jedi Knight
Tresk Im'nel, Jedi Knight
Asyr Sei'lar, political activist
Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master
Han Solo, captain, *Millennium Falcon*
Leonía Tavira, pirate and gunrunner

A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away....

STAR WARS

THE SHADOW WAR

—CHAPTER ONE—

A ribbon of crimson stardust, the material from which a nebula might one day be born, drifted in the distance. Countless chunks of space rock rolled in front of it, tumbling black silhouettes against the red. The asteroid cluster had no name, and the stardust only some alpha-numeric garble given to it by anonymous stellar cartographers long ago. It was a desolate place on the galaxy's outer edge, a place where no where one had cause to go. It was, therefore, a perfect place to hide.

The star destroyer *Invidious* hung in open space, its nose pointing forward to give a good head-on view of the asteroids and the stardust. Its mile-long wedge, once the pale gray of all Imperial star destroyers, had been accentuated by broad swirls of black paint over the years. Its hulls bristled with other modifications as well: docking ports, weapon emplacements, tractor beam emitters, everything a rogue pirate vessel and mobile shadowport could want.

Still, *Invidious* had seen better days. As she stood in front of the broad forward-facing viewport of her personal cabin, Leonia Tavira couldn't help but feel uncharacteristically pensive. The war between

the New Republic and the Galactic Empire, of which she had nominally been a part twenty years ago, had been over for four years. It was a time of law and order, peace and prosperity, for almost all of the civilized galaxy.

It was, all things considered, a horrible time to be an outlaw.

Behind her a voice said, "I believe your broadcast is starting."

It was enough to make her feel a little better. Tavira turned to look over her cabin. What had once been *Invidious's* conference room had been remodeled to contain several long sofas and plush seats, walls decorated with tapestries and looted artwork, and a cabinet stocked with the best liquors a woman could steal.

Seated on the longest sofa, facing the holo-projected image of a three-eyed Gran newscaster babbling away with the audio muted, was a human on the young side of middle age. He was well-dressed in a handsome suit, with dark hair slicked away from a smooth, attractive face. Pedric Cuf smiled politely at her and said, "Would you like to sit down?"

"Very much," Tavira said. "I've been looking forward to this. Just let me fetch a drink."

Tavira walked over to the liquor cabinet, half-filled two tumblers with Tralian whiskey, and carried them over to the sofa. She bent low when she handed it to Pedric Cuf, who responded with a simple grateful nod. Then she sat down on the sofa right next to him, hip lightly pressed against his. He just reached for the remote and turned the audio on the holo-broadcast.

A small woman with raven-black hair and a shapely athletic figure, Tavira had always looked young for her age. Even now most beings told her she looked barely past thirty, and she was confident it wasn't flattery. She'd been good at drawing men's attention since she was just fifteen years old and seduced her homeworld's aged Imperial moff. She was still good at it. The fact that Pedric didn't seem to notice was disappointing.

She would have to settle with his being a good business partner. At least, she hoped he'd be a good one; they were going to find out shortly.

On the holo, the Gran newscaster was saying, "I've just gotten word that we're ready to begin the debate. If you'll watch, you'll see all four candidates for Chief of State of the New Republic take their podiums now."

Tavira leaned forward as the Gran stepped aside and the holocam zoomed in on the platform where all four candidates were taking their places.

"It seems so strange not seeing Organa Solo on that stage," she said.

"She'd become an institution," Pedric said. "Perhaps she felt she was simply... done with leadership."

He said it as though the concept of relinquishing power voluntarily didn't make sense to him. Truth be told, it didn't make sense to Tavira either. Not that she'd ever wanted to be run the entire galaxy like Princess Leia had, not in the least, but what she did have, what life she'd claimed for herself here on *Invidious*, was something she didn't want to surrender, ever.

Meanwhile, her potential successors were taking their places, and the Gran newscaster was helpfully reading off his canned summary for the handful of beings in the galaxy who hadn't been paying close attention to this unprecedented election to determine the Republic's next chief of state.

"And taking the stage on the far right," he said, "You can see Senator Borsk Fey'lya of Kothlis, currently serving as minster of the Justice Council on Chief of State Organa Solo's cabinet. Senator Fey'lya is one of the most senior members of the New Republic senate, having served on the Provisional Council of the Rebel Alliance."

The Bothan's fur looked combed and soft and shiny as he stood there under the lights, gripping the sides of the podium with his paws, head titled back at just the right angle to make him look confident and assured. He had good reason to be; he'd avoided potential political disgrace during the Caamas Document crisis four years ago and was now considered one of the two front-runners in the election.

"And next, we have Senator Celch Dravvad of Corellia taking the stage."

The human, middle-aged and photogenic, smiled a white smile and waved to the clapping audience. Dravvad, a relatively new senator, had made a name for himself as a critic of the peace treaty with the Empire, saying it was too lenient, though he'd always been vague on what to do about it.

"And now, you can see Senator Pwoe of Mon Calamari."

Pwoe was another new senator, the first Quarren to represent a planet most associated with Admiral Ackbar. He was a critic of both the peace treaty and the so-called soft, establishment politicians who had orchestrated it.

"And, finally, we have Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm of Bavinyar, chairman of the Defense Council."

The tall, gray-bearded Cerean walked up to his podium and gave the audience a grateful bow, tipping his cone-topped head forward. Organa Solo, as she wrapped up her last term as Chief of State, was strictly avoiding any comment on the election to replace her, but everyone who knew anything about New Republic politics knew that Behn-Kihl-Nahm was her trusted friend and clearly her preferred successor.

Tavira glanced sidelong at Pedric. "How does it feel, having your homeworld represented on such a prestigious level?"

Pedric's face settled into a frown. "You have no idea."

Tavira smirked. "I wonder if he has any idea of the surprise in store for him."

"He'd better not. Then it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

"I thought you'd want to be on Bavinyar yourself, so you can watch over it personally."

"I'm just a middle-man in my organization. I trust our people on the ground." He glanced sideways at her and smiled. "Now that you've provided them with proper equipment, of course."

"Of course," Tavira smiled, tapped her tumbler lightly against Pedric's and sat back. The plush sofa cushions seemed to wrap around her. She took another sip and smiled.

It was going to be quite a show.

"Myri, will you be quiet, *please*?" Iella said with a sigh as she stuck her head inside her younger daughter's bedroom.

Myri looked up, eyes wide and alert but with an expression as blissfully, annoyingly innocent as only a six-year-old could manage. That exact expression was replicated on the five other schoolkids crammed into her room.

Iella put on her best Authoritative Mom voice and said, "All of you need to keep it down to an *indoor* level, okay? Myri, I don't mind if you have friends over, but your father and I are watching a holo-broadcast and we'd really like to hear what's actually being said, okay?"

Myri blinked and said, so innocently, "Okay, mom."

"Okay, Mrs. Antilles," added the girl next to her.

"We're sorry, Mrs. Antilles," piped another of Myri's friends.

"Just... use indoor voices, all right?" Iella asked. The kids nodded, one after another, without changing their owlsh expressions. Figuring she'd done all she could, Iella left Myri's bedroom, closing the door behind her.

"Mrs. Antilles," she muttered as she walked down the short hallway to the living room. She'd been married for almost a decade now and she still wasn't used to that.

"How'd it go in there?" her husband asked from his place on the sofa.

"I think I temporarily calmed them. We'll see how long it lasts."

It was mid-afternoon in Galactic City, where the debate was being held, but here in Corellia's capital of Coronet, the sun had just gone down, and the brilliant skyline was lighting up outside the windows of their apartment. Wedge had retired with a general's rank and a general's pension, which meant they could afford a place with a good view at any hour.

Iella was pleased and unsurprised to see Myri's sister Syal seated cross-legged in the chair next to the sofa. Syal was just one year older than Myri but acted a lot more mature than seven standard years. She watched the holo of the debate intently, dark eyebrows drawn together.

Iella dipped into the kitchen to fetch herself a little drink. She heard Borsk Fey'lya's mellifluous, smooth voice say, "I'm sorry, but I must disagree with Senator Dravvad. The peace treaty with the Empire, while imperfect, brought an end to over twenty years of hostilities and we've seen no indication the Empire has any intention of violating the rules of the agreement."

"Senator Pwoe," said the moderator, "Do you have a comment?"

"It's obvious why Senator Fey'lya is such a staunch defender of the Pellaeon-Gavrisom Treaty, given that it neatly saved the Bothans from their own mess."

"I object to that statement!" Fey'lya snapped, no longer silky-smooth. "The actions of a handful of saboteurs on Caamas fifty years ago in no way reflects on the current Combined Clans."

Iella sighed and took a sip of her husband's Tralian whiskey. She'd probably need more of it before the night was through.

"We understand your position, Senator Fey'lya," the moderator was saying patiently as Iella carried two glasses into the living room. "Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm, do you have a comment?"

"In this instance, I'd agree with Senator Fey'lya," the Cerean said calmly. "The Pellaeon-Gavrisom Treaty has been a success so far. No more sons and daughters of the Republic have died, and the Empire had stayed within its territory. Besides, I wouldn't want it to be said that we in the Republic break an oath the Empire keeps."

He smiled in good humor, and that got a few claps from the audience.

Iella sighed as she settled down next to Wedge. She held out her second glass. "Have your favorite, dear."

"Gladly," Wedge said. He took it, sipped, and glanced sidelong at Syal, who was still watching the holo intently.

"It's always a show, isn't it?" she said.

"Very," he nodded. "It's not like Pwoe or Dravvad would *really* renege on the treaty if they got in power, but they found a base they can play to."

"Then why are they saying they would?" asked Syal, serious and naive at once.

"Because some people, for different reasons, aren't happy we made peace with the Empire," Wedge told his daughter. "Pwoe and Dravvad want to play to their hopes."

"But *why*?"

"Because some people think we should have gotten more territory from them, or some kind of reparations, or maybe dismantled the Empire entirely. But that would have taken another war. Pwoe and Dravvad both know that, but they make a fuss anyway to get votes from people who don't."

Syal frowned and looked back at the holo, where the moderator was giving Celch Dravvad a question about the Defense Forces. The girl muttered, "I'm glad we're not at war anymore."

Iella smiled lightly. Syal had been just three years old when the treaty was signed and didn't remember a bit of it. She had no idea what her parents had gone through before the war's end allowed them to retire and focus on family.

"Doesn't the Chief of State get elected by the senators?" Syal asked next.

"That's right," Wedge said.

"Then why show this debate? Those people in the audience, they're not senators, are they?"

"No, but senators answer to the will of the people they represent. The Republic has billions of beings, Syal, and making sure every single one votes is pretty much impossible. That's why the senators all vote, so they can represent their people."

That was the way it was supposed to work, anyway, but as every adult knew, there was plenty of backroom dealing in the Senate. Borsk Fey'lya was a master at that sort of thing, but Behn-Kihl-Nahm was another veteran senator, and no slouch at it either, even if he wasn't as nakedly ruthless as the Bothan.

Next Syal asked, "If Dravvad is running, and he's from Corellia, does that mean we don't get a vote?"

Wedge glanced at his wife, silently asking if she'd be willing to field civics questions for a while. Iella said, "Every planet in the Republic has a senior and junior senator. Dravvad's junior senator will vote for Corellia."

"So he'll vote for Dravvad?"

"That's... probably what will happen. But he doesn't *have* to."

"But he has to vote for whoever's popular on Corellia, right? And people *do* like Dravvad."

"You're right, a lot of people do," Iella allowed. "That's why he'll probably get Corellia's vote."

She was still uncertain herself; the senator was relatively young and had risen to prominence as a voice of pragmatism and interspecies cooperation in the wake of the Centerpoint Crisis six years earlier. The thing about Dravvad was, he was so pragmatic it was hard to tell what he really believed. Sometimes she thought he was running on an anti-Imperial line to raise his political clout rather than win; other times she wondered whether he was hoping to get pushed ahead by virtue of being the sole human in the election. That was a nasty thing to think about, but it was something a smart politician would be aware of, especially from a system with the fraught racial politics like Corellia.

On the broadcast, Dravvad was saying, "I believe it's important to keep the New Republic defense fleet strong to fend off incursions from the Empire, the Unknown Regions, or any other enemies we have. At the same time, I think it's also important to realize that different star systems have different priorities and that some amount of autonomy should be granted to local defense fleets."

"This is tricky" Wedge told Syal. "He wants to look tough on defense, big on the military. He's also Corellian, and Corellians don't like being told what to do."

"He's trying to say two things at once," Syal looked confused.

"I think it's called having your rhyscate and eating it too."

"But that's impossible."

"Honey," Wedge smirked, "I think our outgoing Chief of State once told me that politics is the art of making the impossible possible."

Leia Organa Solo leaned forward intently in her seat and tried to ignore her husband as Han said, "What? That's not a dodge, he's

right! You've gotta learn to look at this from the perspective of the little guys."

"Corellia's a highly populated, industrialized system," Leia's chief of staff, Nanaod Engh, told him, "They're hardly 'little.'"

"I know. And I know you can't just mothball the fleet 'cause the Empire's gone, but you can't just go around telling every star system what to do either."

"Han, please, I'm trying to listen," she said, and tried to keep the edge from her voice.

To his credit, Han didn't protest any more. He leaned back on the sofa next to her, arms crossed over his chest, and said nothing. The gathering in Leia's office was small: Han, Leia, and Engh, plus a handful of senators from her circle of allies, including Cal Omas, Alderaan's junior senator, and Elegos A'Kla of Caamas.

"Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm," said the moderator, "As Chairman of the Defense Council, I'm sure you have an opinion on this issue."

"Of course," Bennie bowed his head, polite as ever. "Though I am not as worried about the Empire as Senators Pwoe or Dravvad, I do believe it is important to keep vigilant."

"So you support a centralized military?"

"I support a design where planetary systems can build their own defense fleets, within limits, so long as those local forces are subordinate to Fleet Command. At the same time there is no cause to totally dismantle the five battle groups of our centralized defence force, though some reorganization for peacetime would be prudent. As you know, I am from Bavinyar. Our planetary militia is modest, but large relative to our total population. Furthermore, it's an institution Bavinyari citizens take pride in. I have no desire to disrupt it."

"See?" Han whispered to Leia. "Even your own guy agrees with me."

Leia fought a frown. Han hadn't said anything wrong; Bennie was her longtime friend and trusted ally. She would certainly rather see him as her successor as anyone else on that stage, and pretty much everyone in politics knew it. Still, she hated being seen as

biased, and tried to never let it influence her actions as Chief of State even as she wound down her final term.

"So you would like to essentially continue the defense policies of your predecessors?" asked the moderator, clearly following the same line of thought.

"I believe some overhauls are necessary, as I said," Bennie smiled easily. "We are no longer at war. We no longer need to pull millions of sons and daughters from their parents to fight in far-off systems. I have great respect for how Organa Solo and Gavrisom managed the military, just like I respect Admiral Ackbar and the other senior commanders. I will be happy to work with Ackbar and their people to streamline our military, to make it smaller, more efficient, and more federalized without debilitating our capacity to respond to threats."

It was a polite, veiled jab at Fey'lya, who made no secret of his desire to replace Ackbar, but the moderator didn't veer the debate in that direction. Instead he said, "You've all talked a good deal about the Republic's ability to respond to external threats. However, nothing's been said about conflict *inside* the New Republic. I'd like you all to take a minute to address how you'd handle a case of violent or potentially violent instability on a specific Republic member world."

Triebak gave a low roar behind her, and Cal Omas added, "You're right. *This* one could get tricky."

That it could, but Leia knew that if anyone could handle it, Bennie could. She leaned in a little closer.

General Etahn A'baht sat alone in his office deep within the New Republic Defence Force headquarters complex on Coruscant. His arms were crossed over his chest and his rough, violet-skinned Dornean face was stoic as he watched the debate. He'd been expecting this question for a while and was surprised it had taken this long to come up.

"This will always be a difficult question to answer," Senator Pwoe was saying. The tentacles on his face were curling in what looked like distaste, but A'baht couldn't read Quarren facial

expressions well enough to know what it actually meant. "However, I think it is generally important that we allow differences between populations within a New Republic member planet to be sorted out democratically and peacefully within the local power structure."

It was the sort of thing A'baht expected him to say; Mon Calmari was, after all, split between two native sentient species. Celch Dravvad, who represented a system with three sentient species, said, "I agree with Senator Pwoe. The New Republic is not the Empire. It allows autonomy to its member systems and trusts them to act responsibly."

"That is all well and good when the members *do* act responsibly," the moderator said, "But what do you recommend if the local power system breaks down and things become violent?"

For a short moment, none of the four candidates spoke. A'baht allowed himself a brittle smile; it was the first time all night they'd all gone speechless at once.

Finally, Fey'lya said, "Of course every situation must be handled independently, but I do believe that, in some cases, the Republic must be willing to use force to ensure its own laws are being followed. That includes use of military action."

The moderator said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, Senator, but weren't you just advocated for a decentralized military a few minutes ago?"

"I did, and I stand by that decision. However, we will always have a New Republic navy and that navy will always be ready when needed. If there is a small local disturbance, surely the standing navy can handle it." Fey'lya quickly added, "But once again, use of lethal force must be very carefully considered. It is always imperative to work with the government and local citizens to resolve conflicts peacefully."

It was what A'baht expected Fey'lya to say. Bothan politics had plenty of conflict, but it was always done with mostly-metaphorical knives in the back rather than blasters and bombs. An actual civil war in Bothan space was unthinkable.

"Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm," the moderator said, "What is your opinion on this matter?"

The Cerean licked his lips before speaking; a rare sign of nervousness. A'baht had had plenty of professional experience with the Defense Council Chairman, especially during the Black Fleet Crisis eight years back, and while he trusted the Cerean's judgment, he knew that this was an especially tricky case.

"As many of you know," the chairman began, "My homeworld is a demographically divided one. On Cerea, there was a schism between those who embraced technology and the larger galaxy, and those who did not. In the early years of the Empire, those who did were relocated to Bavinyar. The Empire was not being generous, of course. It had just driven Bavinyar's human settlers off that world and wanted to make sure none of them came back.

"Well, they have come back. Bavinyar is now a world split in half between Cereans and humans who've returned to the world the Empire stole from them. And it has not always been easy. But we have peace. We have a unity government with a Cerean prime minister Pohl-Had-Narr and a human vice minister. I believe we can solve our problems peacefully because I have seen it happen."

It was all fair enough, A'baht knew, but he was still sidestepping the question. Bavinyar had extremists on both sides who wanted the planet for only Cereans or only humans. Pohl-Had-Narr had agreed to take on a human vice minister because of the pressure from armed human factions.

A'baht knew all this because Bavinyari exiles had come to Dornea during the early years of the Empire. The feisty human settlers had bravely fought alongside Dornea's soldiers in their shared fight against Imperial encroachment.

Of all the Bavinyari, he'd known Jadesei Syne the best. She'd served under his command for over a decade and had even captained a shipful of Dorneans. And now, she was the vice minister of Bavinyar.

"A unity government is encouraging, Senator," the moderator was saying, "But again, what happens if that unity fails?"

Ben-kihl-nahn swallowed and said, "Then we send in our diplomats, or peacemakers, and if necessary *peace-keepers*. But military action should only be the most final resort."

The moderator nodded, as if he knew he wouldn't get any more out of the candidates. He glanced down at his datapad for the next question, and A'baht could see all four of them behind the podiums breathing out restrained sighs of relief.

"Our next question," the moderator said, "Is about the rebuilt Jedi Order led by Luke Skywalker. I'd like to hear your plans for how the relationship between the New Republic and the Jedi should operate going forward. Senator Fey'lya, please begin."

"Thank you," the Bothan said, leaning into his microphone. "I believe my opinion on this matter is well-known. I believe the Jedi are an important asset to the well-being of the Republic. Master Skywalker's integrity is beyond reproach.

"However, it must not be forgotten that the Jedi are subject to rule of law just like everyone else. Despite Master Skywalker's good intentions, he cannot control all of his apprentices at every time. Lest anyone forget, dozens of New Republic senators were brutally murdered when one of Master Skywalker's failed students bombed the senate hall.

"Therefore," Fey'lya continued, "I would implement a separate division of the Justice Department to oversee and regulate all actions undertaken by the Jedi."

"I concur with Senator Fey'lya," said Pwoe. "The Jedi are powerful beings, too powerful in many ways. They are of course useful for all kinds of things, but they serve the Republic. We must not let them forget that."

If Pwoe and Fey'lya agreed on something, thought A'baht, the Jedi really were in trouble.

"Thank you," the moderator was saying, "Senator Dravvad?"

A'baht watched the Corellian closely. He was a bit of an unknown factor; it was hard to tell which way he'd sway.

"Well," Dravvad said, "I believe it is important to work closely with Master Skywalker in this. I know he's put forth a proposal to re-establish a Jedi Council. I believe that facilitating this and making sure it operates under the aegis of our civilian government, would go a long way to preventing any problems with the Jedi."

"Thank you, Senator," said the moderator. "Now I'd like to turn to Chairman Behn-Kihl-Nahm, who looks like he's eager to put in his word."

"I most certainly am." Behn-Kihl-Nahm gripped the sides of his podium tight. "I must say, I'm shocked at the aspersions being cast on the Jedi Order this evening. Timme and again, Master Skywalker and his colleagues have saved the New Republic from dire threats. That they should be treated as threats themselves is unconscionable."

"That being said, I certainly support the creation of a Jedi Council, if Master Skywalker wishes it, and if he sees some alternative to governing his Jedi Order I will be happy to consider that also. This man..."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm had trailed off. Someone was bent low next to the moderator, whispering something into his ear. When that messenger darted out of view, the moderator squared his shoulders and said, "I'm sorry for the delay. I'm afraid we're going to have to cut this debate short."

"For what reason?" asked Fey'lya from his podium.

The moderator shifted to look at Behn-Kihl-Nahm. "I'm sorry to inform you, Senator, that the prime minister of Bavinyar, Pohl-Had-Narr, has just been assassinated."

For a priceless moment, the Cerean senator stood there, like his blue holo-image had just frozen. Then he nodded his head and said, "Thank you. I assure you the Republic will be very active on Bavinyar from now on. We will resolve this crisis, I promise you."

The moderator raised a hand, and the holo-image winked out. A second later that Gran commentator appeared. Pedric Cuf picked up the remote and shut the holo off. Then he turned to Leonia Tavira, raised his glass with the other hand, and said, "That was exceptional theater."

"Agreed." Tavira clinked her glass. "Almost too good. It will look suspicious."

"Of course it will," Pedric said. "It's supposed to. My people wanted to send a message, and they've sent it the best way possible."

"Yes, this election will take a very interesting turn now." Tavira took a sip and said, "Vice Minister Syne will take over the government now, correct?"

"Those are the rules of succession."

"But from all I've heard, Syne is a moderate. She's not a part of your Bavinyar Independence League. Is she?"

Pedric grinned. "You can't expect me to tell you everything. You're only our gunrunner."

"Very well." She pouted. "I'm eager to see your next move then, Mr. Cuf. I always enjoy seeing the rebel government find new ways to embarrass itself."

"I know. It's why I came to you in the first place."

Tavira settled in the sofa next to him, shoulder-to-shoulder. She took another sip from her glass and asked, "Tell me, Pedric, what do you *really* want from all this?"

She wasn't looking at him, but she could feel him jerk a little in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You could have assassinated Pohl-Had-Narr, at any time, but you chose to do it now. I assume you want to embarrass Behn-Kihl-Nahm, knock him out of the election, at the very least."

"Our goal is to cause chaos inside the Republic so we can more easily secede. That the Cerean senator is running for chief of state is... a happy coincidence."

She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "I have not become what I am by trusting coincidence."

To that, Pedric Cuf responded with a white-toothed smile. "The whole truth will come together in time, Leonia. I promise you that. You need only wait, and trust me."

"I've not become what I am by trusting, period."

"Then just wait." That smile didn't falter. "I think you'll see this is the start of a very fruitful relationship."

—CHAPTER TWO—

After the sudden end of the presidential debate, it took less than one hour to assemble all the members of the New Republic's advisory council. Most of them, including President Organa Solo herself, came from private residences where they'd been watching the debate, and promptly took their private speeders to the senate headquarters building.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm found himself sharing a ride with Borsk Fey'lya. It wasn't something they did often; Fey'lya had never been his favorite in the senate and the Bothan surely returning the feeling, though he was too practiced a politician to say it aloud, even in private. As the two beings, councilors and rival candidates both, sat next to each other in the back of the CSF speeder, they awkwardly struggled with something to say. It was only a ten-minute jump from the convocation hall to the senate building but it felt like it took forever.

Eventually Fey'lya said, "I assure you, I'll make sure you have the full cooperation of the Justice Council in your investigation," though his violet eyes were on the lit-up skyscrapers of Galactic City as they whipped past.

"Thank you, Senator," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. His attention stayed stiffly ahead, peering over the back of the driver's blue-capped head.

Fey'lya didn't say anything about the timing. Behn-Kihl-Nahm didn't expect him to. It was so obvious there didn't seem anything to say. Whoever had assassinated Pohl-Had-Narr (and Behn-Kihl-Nahm still knew nothing about the how of it) had clearly timed the strike to interrupt the debate and humiliate him. He wracked his mind to think what time it was on Bavinyar's capital of Cephalia. Early morning, probably. He wasn't even sure what time it was here in Galactic City; everything was a dizzying blur as he tried to make sense of too many things at once.

When the speeder arrived at the senate buildings, armed guards were waiting for them. As a senior senator and members of the Advisory Council, Behn-Kihl-Nahm was used to having guards around, but right then they sent a chill down his spine.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Fey'lya were quickly ushered deep inside the senate complex, into the windowless chambers where Leia's advisory council met. The princess was already there, at the far end of the oblong table, talking to her chief of staff, Nanaod Engh. The plain human was waving a datapad around, explaining something to her, the leathery-faced Diamalan senator Miatamia, and feathery Calibop Ponc Gavisom, former President of the Senate and now Leia's top diplomat. When Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Fey'lya entered, Leia's attention immediately locked onto the new arrivals.

"Oh, Bennie," the princess said, stepping away from Engh and Miatamia, "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, Leia," he said with his best polite smile, though they all knew the smile was fake and it wasn't all right.

From Behn-Kihl-Nahm's shoulder, Fey'lya asked, "Do we have specifics on the assassination yet?"

"We do," Miatamia nodded. As chairman of the Security and Intelligence Council he'd have been briefed first. He looked around the room and said, "Do we want to wait for everyone else to arrive?"

"We're almost at quorum," Engh said. "We just need Senators Niuv and Beruss."

As if on the cue, the door to the chamber slid open and two guards escorted the squat Sullustan senator into the room. Niuk Niuv blinked his big black eyes and said, "I'm sorry for your loss, senator."

"Don't feel sorry for me," Behn-Kihl-Nahm shook his head. "Feel sorry for the people of Bavinyar. This is a black day for us. Despite all the strife between humans and Cereans on my world, the outright assassination of a prime minister is... *was* beyond the pale."

"Then we had best act clearly and decisively," Fey'lya said, crossing his arms over his chest. "We don't want to be seen as weak."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm knew there was also a danger of coming on too strong, especially on a world like Bavinyar, where the human settlers in particular rankled at outside authority. After what they'd suffered under the Empire it was hardly surprising. Of course, Fey'lya's people had been at the center of the crisis over the Caamas document four years back, and some still said Gavrisom, as acting chief of state, had dawdled too long to assert authority.

The Caamas crisis had come close to ruining Fey'lya's political career, but the revelation that rouge Imperial agents had been meddling in an attempt to spark a civil war in the Republic had been a sort of vindication for him, as well as for Senators Miatamia and Niuv, who had led the factions defending Bothan interests against calls for harsher punishment. It was that lucky stance that was primarily responsible for those two being placed on the council now.

Leia looked to Engh and asked, "Any word on Senator Beruss?"

"Just a moment. Let me check." The staff chief pulled out his comlink to check his messages. Just as he did so, the doors slid open and the council's newest member stepped in. Blond-haired and still bright-eyed, Avan Beruss had been a Rogue Squadron pilot before losing a leg in combat and retiring into the family vocation of politics. He had assumed his father's seat representing Illodia after old Doman had been killed in Kueller's bombing of the senate.

Avan looked around the group until his eyes settled on Behn-Kihl-Nahm. He opened his mouth to give yet another apology, but before it came out, Fey'lya said, "All right, we have a quorum. Let's get to work."

Everyone took seats around the table except for Miatamia. The security chairman stayed on his feet to give his presentation. He tried to look around the room as he spoke but his eyes kept settling on Behn-Kihl-Nahm.

"We've reviewed reports from local Bavinyar security," the Diamalan said. "Unfortunately, we don't have many people on the ground ourselves, so we're mostly having to rely on local reports."

"Go on, Senator," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said.

"From what we've been able to learn, it seems that Prime Minister Pohl-Had-Narr was killed along with his family and aides in the governor's palace on Cephalia."

"All of them?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm felt his stomach sink.

"Yes, Senator. It was an explosion. The BSA doesn't want to make a statement yet, but it appears that someone fired an explosive projectile *into* the windows of prime minister's quarters."

"Fired from *where*?" Avan asked, frowning. "The air? The ground?"

"We're not sure of that yet. It appears that the prime minister, his family, and many of his key aides were gathered to, ah, watch the presidential debate."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm lowered his head. Pohl-Had-Narr had, once upon a time, been a student of his. His promise had been visible right away: the young Cerean had been determined to make Bavinyar work despite its split in cultures and species, and had surrounded himself with people who held the same belief.

"What about the vice minister?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm asked. "Was she present?"

"Jadesei Syne was not in the palace when it was attacked," Miatamia said.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm wondered whether she was supposed to be. It was an awful thought, but there it was. He didn't know Syne half as

well as he should have. She didn't have the reputation of a radical, but reputations could deceive.

It was Fey'lya he asked it for him: "Was she *supposed* to be?"

Miatamia blinked. "I don't know at this time."

Fey'lya's fur bristled as he looked to Behn-Kihl-Nahm. "I know the humans on your world are particularly... entitled. We should begin by investigating their organization. The Justice Council will give you full support."

The Bothan was playing a more transparent game than usual. He wanted to make his office look strong and Behn-Kihl-Nahm's look weak. He would also probably score points with certain non-human voters if he cracked down on Bavinyar's human radicals.

"The BSA had been investigating the Bavinyar Independence League for some time. Your departments should coordinate with them." Behn-Kihl-Nahm shifted his gaze from Fey'lya to Miatamia. "Both of you should."

Gavrisom gave a whinnying noise and said, "As I understand it, Senator, the Bavinyar Security Agency is essentially a police force, yes?"

"That's right."

"And it is staffed primarily by Cereans."

"Almost thirty percent are human, actually."

"I also understand that the local defense fleet is primarily staffed by humans."

"Almost ninety percent, yes. But it's a very small fleet, only two light cruisers and a frigate."

"What's the reason for the discrepancy?" Avan asked.

"It's simple, really. The local police force is staffed by Cereans because it's all the Empire let us have. The local defense fleet is mostly made by humans who returned to Bavinyar after the Empire fell and brought their ships with them."

"And many of those had direct experience fighting in the Rebel Alliance," Leia spoke up for the first time.

"I'm sure Bavinyar's Cereans did their part fighting the Empire as well," Fey'lya put in.

"Of course they did," Leia said. "I didn't mean to imply-"

"I know you didn't, Leia," Behn-Kihl-Nahm waved a hand and looked at Fey'lya. "Just as I'm sure you didn't meant to imply that Cereans deserve to live on Bavinyar more than humans."

"Of course not," the Bothan said easily.

"And this Jadesei Syne." Niuv asked, "Was she part of the defense fleet?"

"She was," Behn-Kihl-Nahm nodded. "And she fought with the Rebel Alliance and New Republic before that."

"I understand that she actually fought with the Dorneans," Gavisom said. Unlike the Mon Cals, Sullustans, or Bothans, the Dorneans had defended their small slice of the Outer Rim alone for thirty years, and had only joined the New Republic after the Emperor was long dead.

"I'm, ah, not sure of the specifics," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, "But I know a large group of Bavinyari exiles settled in Dornea and helped them fight off Imperial incursions. Jadesei Syne was among them. The humans on Bavinyar adore their war heroes, for reasons that should be obvious."

"But what about Syne and the BIL?" Fey'lya asked pointedly. "What ties does she have to human separatists?"

"Syne has a reputation as a moderate. It's why Pohl-Had-Narr picked her as vice minister in the first place.

"But potential ties will definitely be investigated," Miatamia said.

"Of course," Behn-Kihl-Nahm bowed his head.

An awkward silence fell over the room. Leia drummed her fingers on the tabletop, then said "Bennie, I assume you're going to want to go to Bavinyar for the prime minister's funeral."

"Oh, yes."

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of people to talk to." Leia glanced at Gavisom. "Senator, I want you to go too. Bennie can go as a Bavinyari, but I want you to go as our Minister of State. Do you understand?"

"Very much, princess," Gavisom's head bobbed on its long feathery neck. "And I assume... other represent-atives will come too?"

"If you mean security and intel people, yes. I haven't decided who just yet, but I will."

A little cautiously, Avan asked, "What does this mean for the election?" After a short, electric pause, he added, "I mean, the timetable. Should we suspend campaigning?"

That didn't do anything to take the charge out of the silence. Eyes drifted cautiously to Leia. She took a deep breath, blew it out, and said, "I'll declare a one-week pause in campaigning, in honor of Pohl-Had-Narr."

"And after that?" asked Fey'lya.

"We'll see. But I don't intend to move the timetable on the election right now."

"That is understandable," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. "Thank you for the week, Leia."

She nodded once, grimly. "I hope that will be all we need."

The sky over Cephalia was a crystal blue and the white clouds drifted slowly high above didn't cast a single shadow onto the island. The noon-day sun shone down brightly and over the walled-off gardens that surrounded the prime minister's estate; trumpet-flowers with gold and scarlet heads turned their faces upward to soak in the light and faint water from a brief morning shower glistened inside leaves and flower-petals that bobbed slowly on the faint refresh-ing breeze. It was another beautiful day in Bavinyar's capital city.

Aryon Ven of the Bavinyar Security Agency felt like he was being mocked. The young human was part of the team that had been combing over the estate grounds for the past five hours; they'd started almost immediately after that explosion that had apparently turned most of the presidential mansion to rubble. Ven had been on the far side of the capital, in the BSA head-quarters complex, watching Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm and the other candidates debate with a half dozen other BSA detectives, most of them Cerean, when the call had come down to rush all available staff to the prime minister's complex at once. Ven hadn't had a clue what was going on until he was in his landspeeder, racing through the city streets

toward an ugly black pillar of smoke rising toward the clearing clouds.

Instead of being part of the forensic team that was searching the exploded compound, Ven had been sent to scour the gardens and walls for any signs of illicit entry. The actual investigation of the estate grounds was probably a very nasty job, but Ven would still rather be right where the action was instead of wandering through fields of tall grass and flowers, wading knee-deep through ornamental ponds, and crouching in the dirt where three-meter-high dura-crete walls met the earth.

He had to wonder whether it was because he was human instead of Cerean. He didn't like thinking about things like that but when almost all of his co-workers were Cerean, and every last one of his superiors, he had to wonder. When he'd seen that black smoke in the sky his gut reaction had been that the Bavinyar Independence League was behind it. The human separatists had made a lot of noise but never strick out at a major target before; still, everyone on Bavinyar, human and Cerean both, had long been expecting them to put action to words.

Ven had no affection or connection with the BIL, but it still had made him shirk from the gazes of the Cerean detectives, all of whose faces set into hard anger when they learned their prime minister and his family had been killed. He knew logically that he had no reason to be ashamed of what the human separ-atists had-probably- done, but he was afraid of seeing something in their eyes.

There were plenty of other good reasons to keep Ven from the front of the investigation, not the least seniority. He was only twenty-three standard years and the youngest member of the BSA investigation department on Cephalia. Still, he was a detective, and Chief Investigator Sham-Vi-Diin had sent him out to search the grass with the other patrol officers; he couldn't help but feel slighted.

He tried to put his mind off all of that and keep searching the compound. He walked along the inner rim of the walls, craning his neck back and squinting through a faceful of sunlight as he scanned the top of the barriers. A sensor network ran along the entire top of

the structure, all the way around the compound, and it should have detected anyone or anything that might have tried to climb over the wall. Still, someone might have found a way to damage or modify a section of sensor relays that would have allowed them to pass. He was sure that another investigative team was pouring over all the security camera footage, but there was no way to know if that, too, hadn't been tampered with.

Ven was staring up at the wall-top when he almost tumbled face-first into the dirt. He slapped a palm against the wall to steady himself and looked down at the hole his right foot had fallen in.

It was more than a hole; the earth fell away under his foot and kept falling, deeper and deeper down a shaft that looked just wide enough for a human to slide head-and-shoulders through. Ven crouched low and looked it over; someone had attempted to cover the entrance with grasses but they hadn't tried to fill in the actual shaft.

He took out a glow-lamp from his belt and shone it down. The walls of the shaft looked as though they had been dug and packed together by some kind of droid or mechanical aid. He guessed it dropped down about four meters, which would probably have been just enough to tunnel under the walls.

He couldn't tell from his angle, but he was sure the tunnel came up again on the other side of the wall, probably in some area that was secure from prying eyes.

He first instinct was to run and tell his superiors; instead, he started scouring the area for signs of human passage. On closer examination, he saw patches of grass and plants that had been trampled, though the foliage was thick in this part of the compound and it was hard to spot anyplace where a boot had fully met dirt.

He did his best to follow the path of broken grasses. There seemed to be only one, though he had no way of knowing if a single being or multiple ones had done the job. Either way, the path was clearly leading toward the still-smoldering estate building.

Then, suddenly, it stopped. It halted outside the rim of one of the gardens' ornamental ponds. The foliage was cleared away here

and Ven ducked low. He scanned the bare dirt, still moist and pliable from the morning's light rain.

He found the boot-prints; they looked a little bigger than his own soles and there was a set of them. He found the point where they stopped; these prints seemed carved a little deeper into the dirt than the others. He scanned the surrounding ground and spotted one small, sharp hole in the ground, located about a meter diagonally forward-left from the boot-prints. Then he spotted another one about a meter away from that, and then a third.

All together, they made a tripod shape in front of the last set of footprints, as though someone had mounted a portable projectile launcher in a stand before shooting it off.

The young man pulled his comlink from his vest and said, "All investigators, this is Detective Ven. I'm in the northwest quadrant of the gardens, near the reflecting pool. Request a forensic team immediately. They need to see this."

The morning after the presidential debate was cut short, General Etahn A'baht reported to Chief of State Organa Solo's office at dawn.

A'baht's relationship with the outgoing president of the senate was a complicated one, and always had been. A'baht had knowingly circumvented her orders during the opening stages of the Black Fleet Crisis and been removed from command, then re-installed as leader of the Fifth Fleet when the crisis turned violent. He'd never been a personal friend to her, like Admiral Ackbar, and had never become a trusted advisor like Generals Rieekan or Dodonna. Yet he was here now, and he knew exactly why.

He had only been in her personal office several times, and never at this hour of day, when dark translucent screens were lowered over the transparent windows to dim the bright morning light. Even with the dimmers, he still squinted slightly as he took his seat across Leia's desk. On the other side there was not only the small human woman, but also Senators Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom.

"Thank you for coming promptly, General," Leia began.

"Thank you for asking my advice." A'baht sat back-straight in his chair, palms flat on his thighs, attention focused on his commander-in-chief. "I assume this is about Jadesei Syne."

"That's correct," Leia nodded. "Senators Gavrisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm are departing for Bavinyar in two hours. We'd all like your appraisal of the planet's new prime minister before then."

A'baht allowed his gaze to shift to the Cerean. "What is your experience with Syne, if I may ask?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. I've met her several times on visits to Cephalia, but only at official functions, usually with Pohl-Had-Narr's staff. I understand you know her much better."

"Perhaps. I haven't seen her in... almost ten years."

"But she did serve with you, did she not?" asked Gavrisom.

A'baht nodded again. "Yes. She captained my flagship when I was serving the Dornean navy, and later when we joined the Republic."

"A human commanding a Dornean vessel," Leia said, apparently impressed. "That sounds unusual."

"It was, but she was raised among our people."

"How many Bavinyari refugees did Dornea take, all told?"

A'baht thought for a moment. "I would say close to sixty thousand, perhaps seventy. They came only a few years after the Clone Wars ended, after the Empire took their world. The, ah, prime minister was just a small child then. When I knew her she'd never even seen Bavinyar. And she wasn't Jadesei Syne then either. She was Jadesei Kaeori."

"I understand that she's supposed to be the daughter of a Bavinyari war hero," Leia said.

"Correct, but when I knew her, she didn't know that. Her parents died fighting the Empire, as I understand it, and the beings who raised her didn't want her to know her real parentage."

Something softened in Leia's expression. "When did she find out?"

"I think it was... twelve years ago. That was when she resigned her service and went back to Bavinyar." A'baht glanced at Behn-Kihl-Nahm. "How much of this were you aware of?"

"Some. I knew she'd served with you, and I knew she was the daughter of a dead leader." The Cerean glanced at Leia. "The Bavinyari revere her for it. It's why she's ascended so high despite being so young."

"How young?" asked Leia.

"I believe she'd about the same age as you."

"I'm not as young as I used to be," she sighed.

Perhaps she was older by human standards, but A'baht was halfway through his second century; Calibops and Cereans were also long-lived compared to humans. Leia didn't seem to realize how young she really was.

Gavrisom turned his small black eyes on A'baht and asked, "What can you tell us about Syne personally?"

"Personally? She's a very driven young woman, of course. She was always very disciplined, so she fit in well with Dorneans. She was quick to learn our language and customs, more than a lot of other Bavinyari we sheltered."

"So she works well with other species?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm asked.

"I think it didn't matter whether we were Dorneans or not. She wanted to hurt the Empire. If she had to learn our ways to do it, then she did."

"This was before she learned who her parents were, correct?" asked Gavrisom.

"That's right. You understand this is common for her generation of Bavinyari humans. They'd been brought up with stories of how the Empire conquered their home and forced them into exile."

"And yet she was more eager to learn your ways than the other humans?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm pressed, and A'baht understood why.

"I know some Bavinyari have a reputation for anti-alien bias, but she was never one of them." Before the Cerean could look too relieved, he added, "You must also understand that she is a Bavinyari patriot above all else."

"How did she feel about the New Republic when you knew her?" asked Leia.

A'baht hesitated before answering. In the time since he'd joined the New Republic's service he'd gone through a variety of opinions

himself. Even now, its convoluted bureaucracy, petty politics, and cumbersome organizational structure often made him yearn for the simplicity of home.

"She left New Republic service after two years," he said carefully. "Of course, that was when she found out who her true parents were. As I said, I've barely spoken with her since." He paused, then added, "I do remember speaking to her when she resigned her New Republic commission. I tried to talk her out of it, of course."

"Was she angry about the Republic?" asked Leia.

"Not precisdely. She was angry, but... Well, it seemed almost like a non-sequitur to me, which is why I remember it. She was angry about Grand Admiral Grant."

He could see the confusion on and Leia's face. Octavian Grant, the last of the Empire's elite grand admirals, was currently living under comfortable house arrest in his villa on Rathalay. He'd surrendered to the New Republic two years after Endor and exchanged secrets for amnesty.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm's face lit up in recognition. "Ah. I think I understand now. Early in his career, before he became a Grand Admiral, Octavian Grant was instrumental in putting down Bavinyar's rebellion against the Empire. The fact that he, out of all thirteen Grand Admirals, is the only one alive rankles the human separatists."

A'baht added, "From her... speech I gathered it's just more than that for Syne."

"What else?" asked Leia.

"From what I can tell, it seems she personally blames Grant for the dead of her parents."

Leia sunk back in her chair, deflated. "And she blames us for letting Grant live?"

"I don't know how serious she is about that. The revelation of her real parentage was fresh at the time. She was... angry when we talked then, angry about many things, as well as confused. And I know that was Mon Mothma's decision to give Grant amnesty, not yours."

"And you haven't talked to her since?"

"Only a few times, briefly. Never about... politics."

"What opinions did she express before resigned her commission?" pressed Gavisom.

"She never expressed opinions hostile to the New Republic. But like I said, she is a patriot. Bavinyar was not a part of the Old Republic. The first human settlers went there a century before the Empire to get away from central authority and they still carry those pioneer, anti-authority attitudes. I can't tell you any more than that. I don't know how the past decade has changed her and I don't know enough about Bavinyari politics to comment."

"Thank you, General, we appreciate that," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, though he still looked troubled. "I have to ask, though. You said that she was very disciplined and made a good sailor in your navy, correct?"

"Very much so."

"Do you believe she had a... military mind?"

A'baht frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Let me put it this way." The Cerean spread his hands. "The three of us on this side of the desk are politicians, ministers, diplomats. Some of us have had war experience but we're not, by nature, soldiers. You, however, are. Do you agree with that?"

"I think I understand what you're saying."

"Good. Then which side of the desk does Bavinyar's prime minister belong on? At the core, is she a diplomat, or a soldier?"

A'baht knew the answer instinctively, and he knew they wouldn't like it. "Jadesei Syne is a soldier at heart."

And he could see it on their faces, all three of them. No, they didn't like it one bit.

Leia Organa Solo, president of the senate and chief of state of the New Republic, got back to her home an hour before noon. She'd last seen it almost a full standard day ago and hadn't slept a wink in the meantime.

She wanted nothing more than to drop into bed and get at least six hours' of sleep, and Nanaod Engh had hastily reconfigured her

schedule to allow just that, but the moment she stepped through the door she was assaulted with the smells of hot caf and nerf stew mixed with Corellian spices.

She staggered into the kitchen. "Han, is that *you*?"

"Well, who else would it be?" her husband said as he turned away from the stovetop and spread his arms wide. There he was all right: Han Solo, infamous smuggler and rogue, with a spoon in one hand and a pale patterned apron around his waist.

Leia was too tired to laugh, but she sunk into the nearest seat with a soundless smile on her face. Han shuffled over and placed the steaming caf in front of her, but she waved it off, saying, "Save it for later. Right now I need sleep." When he looked offended, she added, "I need a good meal, and *then* sleep."

"Coming right up, Princess," Han said, and went back to the stove. "It's already ready."

A minute later they were sitting across from each other, eating hot stew and sipping from glasses of cool, clean water. The kitchen of their residence had a built-in dome overhead, and noon sunlight spilled down through the filtered transparisteel. It made the whole room look wide and open and empty.

When she'd first left this place after taking leave of the Chief of State's office after the Corellian Crisis, she'd had Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin with her. When she came back the kids had all gone off the Yavin 4. Even Chewbacca was visiting his family on Kashyyyk more often than not lately. With just her and Han there now, the place often felt too big, too lonely.

Still, if she was going to be alone with anyone, she was glad it was Han. He waited, waited until she'd chewed through half her meal in silence and gotten her stomach full and warm as it hadn't been in over a standard day before he said, "I saw the news. You suspended campaigning. And you're sending Bennie and Gavisom over there."

She nodded, silently thankful Han hadn't referred to her Minister of State by his usual nickname. "Bennie has to go. And Gavisom sends the right message."

"What about Fey'lya?"

Leia spooned another chunk of nerf meat into her mouth and said, "What *about* him?"

"Letting him have free run over here while Bennie's off on Bavinyar? I bet he'll find a way to spin *that* to his advantage."

"I'm sure he'll try."

When she didn't say anything more, Han pressed, "Well, what do you plan on doing about him? We can't let him muck this thing up, not when there's so much at stake."

"Han, I think this situation is plenty mucked up even without Borsk. Bavinyar's been politically unstable ever since the Empire fell and the exiles started coming back. He can stir a lot of pots here on Coruscant but what happens on Bavinyar isn't about him."

"Who is it about, then? Bennie? You? This new prime minister, Syne?"

Leia smiled a little. "You really did watch all the newscasts, didn't you?"

"Well, in between cooking, yeah. Didn't want to miss anything important."

She reached out across the table and squeezed his hand. "I appreciate that. Really."

"Glad to hear it." Han smirked. "And don't worry. I clean every up to while you catch your beauty sleep."

She took her hand away and began working on her food again. As she chewed on another chunk of nerf beef, Han asked, "Are Bennie and Puffers already gone?"

Leia swallowed, restrained an eye-roll, and said, "I saw them off to Westport before coming here. Once I get some shut-eye I'm off to sit in on Miatamia's security council meeting."

She hesitated. Han raised an eyebrow. "Somewhere else you gotta be after that?"

"I'm not sure." She was better at being evasive when she wasn't so damned tired.

"What's going on, Princess?"

She sighed and said, "What's happening on Bavinyar isn't something new. The roots of this go back to even before the Empire

fell. Jadesei Syne is, apparently, the daughter of one of their war heroes who died fighting the Empire."

"Yeah, I knew they were rebels from back before the Rebel Alliance was a thing. Heard they never let you forget it, the human settlers."

"They're proud of it. They should be. Han, when I was growing up on Alderaan, my father told me stories about the Bavinyar martyrs. He said that when the rest of the galaxy was getting rolled over by Palpatine's war machine, that one little planet put up the best fight of anyone."

"Yeah, and they got their planet conquered and their people scattered all over."

"Exactly. To people who wanted to stand up against the Empire, the Bavinyari were these... tragic heroes. That was what it was like on Alderaan. To these people like Syne who grew up in exile, hearing about their lost world and their martyrs..."

"I get your point. It is, I guess, pretty romantic, if you're into lost causes. But you're not going to Bavinyar, right?"

"I don't think so. Not now, at least. I think I need to go somewhere else."

"Are you gonna keep me in suspense or will you just say it?"

She breathed out and said, "I think I need to go to Yavin 4. Talk to Luke."

"That's it?" Han looked confused and disappointed at once.

Maybe, she thought. She hoped so. "I think I'm going to need his advice."

Han's eyebrows drew together. "You think you want to get the Jedi involved in this?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure what *this* is going to be. But I think I'd like my brother's counsel right now."

"Are you sure it's okay to leave Coruscant right now? What did Engh say?"

"What you'd imagine," she said wearily. Nanaod Engh was a first-rate chief of staff: eternally organized and level-headed, able to balance all the functions of democracy, public relations, and

bureaucracy at once. He was also not a man who took derivations from the norm well.

"But he's letting you go?"

"Nanaod doesn't *let* me do anything, Han. After a lot of questions and frowning he agreed to watch over everything here."

"Did you tell him to watch over Fey'lya?"

"That would have been... inappropriate." She leaned a little closer and said in a stage whisper, "That's what Cal and Avan agreed to do."

Han smirked. "Glad you're not taking your eye off the little furball."

"Han, you know me better than that. Anyway, I shouldn't be gone long."

"Okay." Han placed both hands on the tabletop. "Fine. I'll prep the *Falcon*. We'll leave when you're done with the council meeting."

"Oh, Han, please--"

"Hey, I've got the fastest ferry service in the galaxy. Doesn't even cost the taxpayer any money and it takes you where you want to go, no questions asked, no explanations needed. Besides, you think I'm gonna pass up my chance to see the kids? I spend about as much time with 'em as you lately."

Tired as she was, she smiled. "All right, then. Go prep your ship, Captain. Just as soon as you clean the dishes."

When Sham-Vi-Diin, chief of the Cephalia Homocide Department, reported to the offices of Bavinyar Security Agency Director Korr-Mad-Narr, he came prepared to give a long, thorough presentation outlining everything they'd uncovered during their day-long investigation of the attack that had killed the prime minister. He laid out the sequence of the investigation, then the preliminary findings, including the as-yet-unproven-but-high-likely scenario that an anonymous infiltrator has tunneled under the wall and fired a single tripod-mounted surface-to-surface warhead from a portable launcher that destroyed the estate and killed the prime minister. He was about to go into the further plan of investigation when Korr-Mad-Narr held up a hand and bid him to stop.

"That's enough for now, Chief," the older Cerean said. He saw seated behind his desk while Sham-Vi-Diin stood on the other side; almost absently, the director turned his chair to look out his window at the old white-stone buildings and newer glass towers that made up the capital's skyline.

Korr-Mad-Narr looked almost peaceful, but Sham-Vi-Diin knew better. The director and Pohl-Had-Narr had come from the same prestigious family line, as evidenced by the marker of their shared grandfather present in both their names. Korr-Mad-Narr hadn't always approved of the political stances his cousin had taken, but clan loyalty was still strong among Cereans.

Korr-Mad-Narr allowed the tiniest sigh and said, still looking at the skyline, "I'm going to put you up in front of the holocams, Chief. You're going to tell them everything you just told me."

Sham-Vi-Diin tried to hide his discomfort. He'd never sought the public eye and now every eye in the New Republic would be on him. "Will you be addressing them too, Director?"

"I will. I'll introduce you as the lead investigator on this case." Korr-Mad-Narr swung his chair back around and looked the detective in the eye. "Will that be a problem?"

It was hardly a question a Cerean could say *no* to. Sham-Vi-Diin nodded and said, "Not at all."

"You won't be alone. What was the name of the human who found the entry tunnel and the foot-prints?"

"Aryon Ven, sir."

"If he one of yours?"

"He's a detective, yes. Our newest."

"Young, then?"

"Yes, sir." He tried to recall his subordinate's personnel file. "I believe he was born after the first Death Star was destroyed."

"So young." Korr-Mad-Narr looked satisfied. "Chief, I want you to keep this detective at your side for the whole investigation. Is that understood? He's to be your partner, and the other half of our public face."

Sham-Vi-Diin understood quite well. By putting the gray-bearded old Cerean and the smooth-faced blonde young human on

the news networks, he was at once presenting a unified face behind the investigation, and a clear sign of Cerean seniority.

Ven was young but not a fool. He'd see the same.

"Sir," asked Sham-Vi-Diin, "When I talk to the news networks I'm sure they'll ask me about suspects. What should I tell them?"

"Are you asking whether you should mention the BIL?"

Sham-Vi-Diin nodded.

Korr-Mad-Narr shook his head. "Say that we're looking at all possibilities and can't make any more statements at this time. But believe me, Chief, we'll be putting everything we can into breaking the BIL."

"Understood, sir." Sham-Vi-Diin halted, then added, "What about Syne?"

"What *about* Syne?"

It had been a stupid thing to say; Sham-Vi-Diin realized. He'd come halfway to accusing the incoming Prime Minister in having a hand in her predecessor's assassination. There was no evidence to the fact, and it had been stupid to suggest. Syne had a reputation as a moderate, but she was still human, and with humans- especially Bavinyari ones- you could never be too sure. Doubt gnawed at his guts, and it surely gnawing in Korr-Mad-Narr's as well.

"Nothing," he said finally. "Nothing at all."

"You're one of our most veteran investigators, Sham," Korr-Mad-Narr said sternly. "You'll conduct yourself as professionally as possible and you will be *seen* conducting yourself that way. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Sham-Vi-Diin said, and in a way it was a relief. This whole situation seemed like a nightmare waiting to unfold, and as much as he wanted to learn the full truth behind the prime minister's assassin-ation and see justice done, he knew the political situation was just waiting to spiral out of control. If he had Korr-Mad-Narr willing to shoulder that part of it, well, he was happy to be just a face for the holo-cams.

He just hoped it stayed that way.

The director glancing at his desktop chrono and said, "Cameras start rolling in thirty minutes. Head down to level sixteen, Chief. We're going to pretty you up for the press."

—CHAPTER THREE—

Leonia Tavira stood on the bridge of her star destroyer and watched the blue-white blur of hyperspace whip by outside the broad forward viewport. The bridge behind her was quiet, the crew pits only a quarter-full. It had been a long time since *Invidious* had been as fully staffed as she'd been designed for. The addition of slave circuitry and automated systems made up for much of the loss, but her great vessel still felt hollow much of the time.

It hadn't been that way in the beginning. It was hard to believe it had been almost twenty years since she stole the ship from Warlord Teradoc's fleet; at the time it had felt the fulfillment of all her dreams. With a mighty star destroyer to call her own she'd mustered the biggest, most lethal pirate fleet in the entire galaxy to do her bidding.

It had been a glorious time, until the Jedi and the New Republic ruined it all. She still loved *Invidious* more than anything in the galaxy, but twenty years had worn both her and her ship. She knew she'd never recapture the bright flame she'd had when both she and her lovely ship had been young, but she hoped that now, after so many years of scraping by, her fortunes were about to turn.

She might even get some revenge against the Republic for what they'd done to her.

Tavira glanced at her wrist chronometer, then asked, "Captain Oskvarek, are we ready to revert to real-space?"

"Thirty seconds, Admiral." called her Trandoshan commander from the crew pit.

The *Invidious* crew was a motley assemblage of beings from all corners of the galaxy, a melange of rouges and misfits and fortune-seekers. Almost none of them would have ever been judged fit to wear an Imperial uniform; Oskvarek had an old-style rank badge pinned to the chest of his green jumpsuit designating him as the destroyer's commanding officer, while Tavira herself wore an admiral's badge attached to the green vest she wore unbuttoned above her black trousers. Even if they no longer wore uniforms, she insisted on keeping the old command structure intact. A crew like this needed something to instill discipline, after all.

Tavira stepped closer to the viewport and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. She waited, waited, until the hyperspace-blur dissolved into nothing, revealing a panorama of stars drifting through black space.

And, just as promised, a single Corellian corvette hung in the distance off their starboard bow.

"Are they hailing us, Captain?"

After a moment, Oskvarek said, "Yes, Admiral. They're transmitting the encrypted ident code."

"Does it pass?"

"Yes it does."

"Good. Tell them to dock at our primary hangar. Get ready to transfer our cargo."

"They're asking if you'll meet with them personally."

"Of course." She smiled a coyly. "I want to make sure they pay."

Pedric Cuf had already departed for Bavinyar, and while a part of Tavira missed his presence, she was glad he wasn't here for this. She took the lift tube down to the deck level and marched the rest of the way there. Her two Togorian bodyguards, Grovlith and Argriss, were waiting for her at the entry to the hangar deck. Grovlith was

brown-furred and Argriss black; each towered a full meter over Tavira's head. Each touted a blaster carbine that was almost an intimidating at his long-fanged face. She didn't expect her new clients to start any trouble, but if they did, Grovlith and Argriss could surely take care of it.

She waved for them to fall in behind her, and they did. The three of them marched across the landing deck, past the rows of T-wings, Headhunters, and other miss-matched craft that made up *Invidious's* fighter wing. The corvette had been pulled inside the destroyer's largest berth and hung from the ceiling; walkways extended to its airlocks and as Tavira approached she could see three Cereans stepping out of the forward hatch.

The Cereans waited for her on the walkway. If they were intimidated by the sight of one small human woman and two massive Togorians, they did a good job of hiding it.

"Are you Sar-Ekh-Marr?" she asked the Cerean in the lead.

"I am." He bowed his cone-shaped head. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"The pleasure is mine, assuming you have our payment."

"I do." Sar-Ekh-Marr withdrew a credit chip from his breast pocket. Tavira took it, drew out a reader from the inside of her vest, and slid the chip in.

"You now have full access to the credit account," the Cerean said.

"It appears I do." Tavira smiled and placed the reader and chip both back inside her vest. "I must say, I'm impressed. I didn't think you'd be able to get the money I was asking for. Your organization must have influential backers."

"We have allies," Sar-Ekh-Marr said vaguely.

"I'm sure you do. Give Palt-Ri-gen my regards, and my congratulations on his ingenuity. We've been hearing so much about your, ah, opposite number that I wasn't sure what to make of you."

The Cerean didn't look eager to chat. "When will our cargo be delivered?"

"Right now." Tavira raised a hand and snapped her fingers. Crewmen watching from other parts of the hangar stirred to motion, and a docking tube extended toward the corvette's aft cargo hatch.

Sar-Ekh-Marr nodded to one of the Cereans behind him. The man nodded back and ducked inside his ship, probably to oversee the reception of their weapons shipment.

"I have to say," Tavira added, "Your timing could not be better. I imagine your opposite numbers will be arming up after what just happened."

"The BIL will get overconfident now that they've made their woman prime minister," Sar-Ekh-Marr said. "It will make them vulnerable."

"Well, I'm sure your people will keep the humans in their place."

"Indeed." The Cerean's eyes darted up and down her human form.

"If you find yourself in need of more weapons, you know how to contact me." Tavira spread her arms. "I assure you, I guarantee my clients' satisfaction."

"I'm sure you do," Sar-Ekh-Marr grunted. He turned to the other Cerean behind him and muttered something in his native tongue. The other one said something back. Sar-Ekh-Marr finally turned back to Tavira and said, "We'll be going back to check the shipment now."

"Of course. Take all the time you need."

In the end, the members of the Cerean Patriotic Front were thorough indeed. They took almost five hours to check every crate in their shipment. When they were done they seemed eager to detach from *Invidious'* docking clamps, slip into space, and jump back to their homeworld. As she watched their ship wink into hyperspace from her private cabin, she wondered whether Sar-Ekh-Marr or Pedric Cuf would put their purchases in action first.

After the ship was clear, Oskvarek came to see her. By that time Tavira had slipped off her boots and vest and after she poured two glasses of Tralian whiskey, she slipped across the deck on bare feet

handed one glass to the Trandoshan as he sank down into a soft chair. Oskvarek's three-clawed hand wrapped awkwardly around it, but he was able to tip it back and pour the drink down his toothy mouth.

Tavira sipped her own glass and walked over to the viewport. She said, "I know you have some objections, Captain. Out with them."

"Not objections. Thoughts."

"Tell me your *thoughts*, then."

"I'm not sure it's wise to try and sell to both sides of this fight. If they find out—"

"We have a star destroyer, Oskvarek," she chuckled. "They're just two piddling rebel groups hacking away at each other on a backwater."

"They could report us to the Republic."

It was a risk, she had to admit, but she waved it aside. "We're finally making a profit again. I'm willing to take that chance. Besides, the Republic is going to have a much bigger mess on its hands very soon."

Oskvarek grunted, unconvinced, and drank a little more.

"I should also remind you," Tavira said, "That we're not sending them the same shipments. The humans are getting weapons from our friends in the Republic, and the Cereans are getting old hardware from the *Intimidator*. Believe me, I have thought this through."

"I know," the Trandoshan said.

The Bavinyari humans hated the Empire with a passion and would never have accepted its weapons, which was why Tavira had had to make an arrangement with pliable members of the Republic military. She was still a little surprised the BIL would buy from an ex-Imperial's star destroyer in the first place, but Pedric Cuf seemed to be a very pragmatic terrorist. Likely he wasn't even telling his compatriots where he got his hardware from. As for the Cerean Patriotic Front, it was a lot smaller, and it needed anything it could get.

Invidious had long since worn out its initial Imperial war material, but five years back an information broker named Rev Lessex had directed Tavira to a shocking find: the ruins hulk of the super star destroyer *Intimidator*, once the flagship of the Empire's Black Sword Fleet, drifting derelict on the edge of uncharted space. Despite all the damage it had taken, there was still plenty in the vessel worth pillaging. Most of *Invidious*' turbolaser emplacements had been pried off *Intimidator*, to say nothing of all the munitions and small arms they'd acquired and gradually started selling off.

"Trust me, Captain," Tavira told Oskvarek, "We can work both sides of this conflict and make our operation what it once was."

"And sow chaos in the New Republic too, right?"

She licked her lips and said, "Captain, that's the best part of all."

Both Iella Wessiri Antilles and her husband had retired from the New Republic's services after the end of the war with the Empire, and at first, they hadn't been entirely sure what they would do with themselves when they weren't constantly shouldering the weight of the galaxy. It had been a rather giddy feeling at first; then a boring one. Finally, reality had set in, the kind of reality most beings in the galaxy took for granted.

For his part, Wedge kept himself busy. As one of the Republic's most decorated war heroes, he had a lot of people asking him to give speeches, share expertise, or just generally cast light for them to bask in. Iella didn't begrudge her more famous husband any of it; the day after they set down to watch the ill-timed presidential debates, Wedge caught a hopper over to the other side of Corellia to give a speech at the agricultural university, and the day after that he got on a shuttle and flew out to the CEC construction yards located over Tralus where he'd stay for a two-day gig as consultant on the new starfighter design project the company was working on.

As for Iella, she had Myri and Syal to take care of. Which mostly just meant Myri, since Syal at seven was turning into a little adult, maybe a little too fast. Two days after the presidential debate, when Wedge was off at the shipyards and her old friends and

coworkers on Coruscant were dealing with the latest crisis, Iella was dropping her daughters off at school. Which was just fine by her.

She waved goodbye to her daughters behind the wheel of her airspeeder and watched as Myri and Syl both joined the flow of backpack-laden kids marching gloomily into the maw of their school building. Some things, she reflected, never changed.

As usual, she waited until they'd both disappeared inside the building, then turning her attention forward and fired up the speeder's waiting engines. Her hand froze on the throttle; a small piece of paper flimsy, as big as her palm, was stuck to the windscreen of her speeder. She couldn't tell *how* it had been stuck on, but there it was, edges fluttering in the breeze. She got out of her speeder, went over to the front, and easily pulled the flimsy off. In simply typed words, the paper listed an address and a time.

Iella was almost five years out of the spy game and had no desire to go back. She crumpled the paper in her fist and got back into the speeder. She wanted to fire the engines, fly back home, and stay there until school was done, but she knew she couldn't. She opened her fist and stared at the message, still clear on the crumpled page. Someone must have gone to great lengths to shadow her and pin that message to the windscreen of her speeder in the thirty seconds or so when her attention was elsewhere. They'd used a drone, maybe. She looked up at the clear sky and saw nothing. She sighed and looked back at the paper. She recognized the address. It was one of the side streets that branched off Treasure Ship Row in Coronet City's biggest pleasure district. The time was in the early afternoon, when the lunch crowds were still going strong but before the lights went up and things got rowdy in the evening. Also, she realized, it was before Myri and Syl needed pickup from school.

Iella had no idea who was shadowing her, but she decided she didn't like them at all.

She also knew she had little choice but to show up. She had enough time, at least, to spin back around to the condominium. She went into the bedroom and found the small hold-out blaster and under-arm holster she hadn't put on in close to a decade. She put

them on, plus a light jacket to hide them. She stood for a moment in the mirror of her refresher, staring at herself, at her clothes, her hair, her face, and wondered how in the nine hells she'd come around to doing *this* again.

Of course, there was only one way to find out.

She showed up at the address twenty minutes early in order to scout the area. It was, all things considered, an unremarkable example of the kind of drinking establishments in this part of town. There was a long bar-counter along wall and a four-armed server droid sliding out drinks to a modest mid-day crowd as well as a series of small round tables along the opposite wall. After giving the pub a short look-over she went back outside, walked two loops around the surrounding city block without seeing anything unusual, and went back inside. After taking a seat at the furthest table from the door, with her back to the wall, a short Drallish server came over and asked her pleasure. Iella politely ordered the cheapest, least alcoholic thing they had and set herself to waiting.

She scanned the crowd at the bar and at the tables as surreptitiously as she could. None of them seemed to be glancing in her direction, sneakily or otherwise. The establishment had a pretty even mix of species: humans, Dralls, a single Selonian, two Duros, three squat Bimm, and one from a near-human species she couldn't recognize. A shadow briefly flitted over the sun-bright doorway; then a tall human stepped inside. From the far side of the room it was hard to tell, but Iella thought he paused to take in the scene with a swipe of the eyes. Iella tensed for a moment; then he walked straight to the bar.

Iella was in middle of letting out a breath when someone dropped down beside her. She nearly jumped out of the chair but froze with her palms on the tabletop. She was looking at a Bothan, all black fur, wearing a similarly dark tunic in a female cut. Daylight fell through the window, gleamed in her violet eyes, and suddenly Iella understood.

"Oh, Asyr," Iella panted as she sunk back into her chair. "I can't believe it's you."

The Bothan woman leaned over the table. Her gaze was intent but a little smile peeled back her lips, exposing sharp white canines. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

Ten, almost fifteen years, Iella wanted to say. Asyr Sei'lar had once flown under Wedge in Rogue Squadron. She'd become very close with the squadron's current leader, Gavin Darklighter, which drew threats from Borsk Fey'lya and other Bothans who were disgusted by her relationship with a human. Asyr had never been one to bow to social norms, but Fey'lya wasn't an enemy to take lightly.

After being severely wounded and presumed killed on a mission, Asyr had decided to stay dead and take a new identity in a new place, working behind the scenes to change Bothan society for the better. Iella was one of the few people who knew that; even Wedge and Gavin still believed Asyr Sei'lar had died at Distna. It was one of the few secrets she still kept from Wedge.

"I had no idea it was you," Iella admitted. "I mean, I never thought I'd see you again."

"No offense, but I never thought I'd see you again either," Asyr said. Her voice was soft, almost wistful.

This wasn't going to be a happy meeting, though. Iella could tell. She blew out a breath. "If you went to all the trouble to track me the way you did, this has to be something important, right?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Asyr, you know I'll help you any way I can, but I'm retired. I'm not with NRI anymore."

"But you still know some people on Coruscant, don't you?"

"Some," she admitted, "But I'm not in the position to just call in any favor you need."

"I understand," Asyr nodded. "I'm not expecting miracles, just a little help."

Iella nodded. "All right. What did you come for?"

"You've been following the situation on Bavinyar, haven't you?"

"Reluctantly, yes."

"Then you know Bavinyar's human separatists are suspected of killing their Cerean prime minister."

"I don't think there's proof yet."

"No. That's why I need help."

Iella frowned. "Asyr, I'm sure NRI's looking into this better than you or I can. And what does it matter to you?"

"Because," she said, "I think they're being supplied by Borsk Fey'lya."

Iella stared. When she realized her jaw was hanging open she snapped in shut, then cautiously, quietly, asked, "What makes you think that?"

"Think about it, Iella. This situation could easily ruin Behn-Kihl-Nahm's status as front-runner for the election. If he washes out, that position is Fey'lya's for the taking."

"Doing something like that would be treason. Fey'lya's a lot of things- a *lot*- but he's never been an outright traitor."

"He wouldn't even see it like that. He'd twist things around in his head so he could tell himself he's doing things for the greater good. Trust me, Iella. I know how he thinks."

"Asyr, do you have any evidence of this? Any at all?"

"Some. Even before the assassination, I was tracking movement of supplies and weapons within the Republic military."

Iella raised an eyebrow. "You've got a spy in the quartermaster corps?"

Asyr brushed aside the question. "The numbers don't add up. Someone is slipping off with shipments, mostly of small to medium arms. I still haven't figured out where it's coming from, but I know there's a leak."

"And you thought they were going to Bavinyar? How?"

"It's a long story," Asyr said evasively. "The point is, it's very hard to insert myself onto that planet without being noticed. Now that Bavinyar's getting attention from all over the galaxy, a Bothan isn't going to look as weird walking around with all those humans and Cereans."

Iella frowned. "You want to go there... as a spy?"

"Exactly. Iella, I'm going to need your help with this. I'm going to need to pass as an NRI agent."

"If you're talking about false identification, I'm sorry," she shook her head. "That's all kinds of illegal, Asyr. I could go to jail for that. And it's not like before. I have a husband, I have two daughters. If something happened to me, then they'd..."

Asyr sighed through her nose and sat back in her chair. "I'm sorry, Iella. I forgot. I've been... alone in this work for so long."

"You don't have a family?"

"Nothing," Asyr wagged her head. "The kind of life I chose to lead isn't sociable. But you know what? I am fine with that, I honestly am. Because I have a greater cause."

The conviction in her voice sent a chill through Iella. Asyr had always been idealistic; it had been what had driven her to break Bothan norms and get involved with Gavin all those years ago. That Asyr had always struck Iella as being more vital for it; the one in front of her now seemed cold, gaunt, all the warmth chilled away. This Asyr had no love, just ideals to comfort her.

Iella felt pity and tried not to let it show. She reached across the table and placed a hand on Asyr's black paw.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "But I can't promise anything."

"That's okay. That's all I ask."

—CHAPTER FOUR—

Behn-Kihl-Nahm had flown back and forth between Bavinyar and Coruscant too many times to count. This time, it felt very different. He hadn't been gone long, but it felt like everything had changed.

He'd started a good thirty years ago, when he'd gone to the Imperial Senate, Palpatine's great rubber stamp, to serve as the Ryndellian Sector's representative. Young, inexperienced, and non-human, he'd been possibly the most useless member of a useless body, but at least he'd gained experience with law, diplomacy, and politics that had carried him through the Rebellion and into the creation of a New Republic. And all the while, he'd kept coming back to Bavinyar for short sporadic home-comings, watching it change. He'd watched the capital city of Cephalaria grow larger and larger as its Cerean settler population grew. He'd seen the human exiles return to find their homeworld changed; they'd started as a trickle after Palpatine died and only become a flood after the defeat of Thrawn and the cloned Emperor.

He and Minister Gavrisom set down on Maressa, the spaceport island immediately south of Cephalaria, and took the new rail transport into the capital. When he'd been growing up, the

buildings there had mostly been made of white stone, quarried from the island chain directly north. It had been a handsome, almost quaint city. Now, high metal-and-glass skyscrapers jutted high over the white domes and vaulted rooftops of the city. On a day like this, when the sun shone clear through the warm equatorial air, all of Cephalia seemed to shine.

"I admit I am impressed, Senator," Gavrisom said as he peered out the window. "I have seen holos of your city, of course, but I had no idea it was so... beautiful."

"This is all very new," Behn-Kihl-Nahm explained. "All of these high buildings are only possible because of Bavinyar's new mining industry."

"Yes, I understand that has, ah, taken flight recently."

"When the Cereans were settled on Bavinyar, a lot of us took to farming," Behn-Kihl-Nahm explained. "My family was one of them. Many of the larger islands are volcanic and have very rich soil. For a long time, Bavinyar was mostly an agricultural planet. That was how the first human settlers had lived, and that's how we lived, for a while.

"When the humans started coming back, a lot of them wanted to resume farming, but, well, we Cereans had already been cultivating that land for decades. A lot of the humans see us as squatters, which I never thought about growing up, but in a way they're right."

"I understand that your government made no move to reapportion farmland to the old human owners."

"Our civilian government has always been Cerean, until now," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said under his breath. "The ministers before Pohl-Hadd-Nar were very... entrenched. They wouldn't give back any land to the humans, and the humans had to make settlements on newer islands, harsher islands, closer to the south pole."

"Any attempt to reapportion land would have been very difficult," Gavrisom said. "After all, so many of the original owners were killed fighting the Empire. Land would have to be doled out to children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces."

"I know. And instead of trying to sort that out, we sent the humans to live on the southern islands... And that's where they found the chromicite deposits."

"Fortune smiled on them after all."

"In a way. More and more humans came back to make money at the mines, but a lot of them hold a grudge at not getting their old islands back. Bavinyar is still a very segregated world, Minister. The only place where Cereans and humans really mix in the streets is Cephalia."

Gavrisom blew out a nasal sigh, and the crest of feathers on his head rose up. "Then we shall have to take this place as our example."

"I'm not sure if it's much of an example any more."

Once their maglev train arrived at Cephalia's central station, a local group came to meet the delegation, which aside from Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom also included a half-dozen civilian support staff, and three investigators from New Republic Intelligence.

Of the three, only Colonel Ejagga Pakkpekatt identified himself as such. The colonel was a Hortek, standing over two meters tall with an armored hide and a dragon-like face that made him absolutely unmistakable on a planet filled with humans and Cereans. Horteks were also known to be mildly telepathic and therefore prized by the NRI's investigation units. There was no hiding Pakkpekatt's identity, but he also made it easier for his two human assistants to disguise themselves as Gavrisom's diplomatic aides.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm was glad to see the greeting party was a mix of Cereans and humans. He did not see Jadesei Syne among them, but hadn't expected her to come out into the open like this.

Instead, he and Gavrisom got to shake hands with General Harbin Kaice, chief of the Bavinyar Defense Forces. He was a stout human with broad shoulders, bristling black hair, and a brown leathery face. Even when he smiled politely his eyes were dark. He was military, through and through.

"I'm glad the Republic decided to send representatives for the memorial ceremony," Kaice said.

"Minister Gavrisom and his team represent the Republic," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. "I'm here as a citizen of Bavinyar."

"Of course." Kaice glanced at a pair of beings in blue BSA uniforms standing over his left shoulder. He said, "These are Sham-Vi-Diin and Aryon Ven. They are in charge of investigating Pohl-Hadd-Nar's death."

Death, Behn-Kihl-Nahm noted. A more neutral term than *assassination* or *murder*. He turned his attention to the two investigators. Sham-Vi-Diin was a little short for a Cerean, but his head still peaked high above that of his partner. The blonde-haired human struck Behn-Kihl-Nahm as rather young even for human standards. That the government would pair a human and a Cerean to investigate the assassination was obvious; that the Cerean was clearly the senior officer struck Behn-Kihl-Nahm as a deliberate choice too.

"I'm eager to talk about what you've uncovered so far," he told them.

Kaice cleared his throat. "Right now, I believe we should take you to the quarters we've prepared for your team. We can speak on the way."

"Thank you, General," Gavrisom said. "And, please pardon my memory, but when will the ceremony for Pol-Hadd-Narr take place?"

"Tomorrow morning," the general said, "In approximately fifteen hours."

"Very good. We shall even have time to rest."

After that, they were placed in a secure hovercar and spirited through Cephalia's streets. The transparisteel windows were tinted dark and mirror-like from the outside, and it made the streets they passed seem dim and vague. When he normally came back to Bavinyar, Behn-Kihl-Nahm simply took an unprotected speeder. The sudden change in security procedures was jarring and unsettling. He listened only half-attentively as General Kaice explained the security procedures of the ceremony tomorrow to Gavrisom. The Cerean investigator, he noticed, had been placed in the second car with Colonel Pakkpekatt and some of the diplomatic

staff, including the undercover NRI agents. Perhaps Sham-Vi-Diin had been charged with sniffing them out; if so, the Hortek would make for an imposing counterpart.

That left Behn-Kihl-Nahm to speak with the younger investigator, Aryon Ven. He leaned forward in his seat so he could look the blonde-haired human in the eye.

"Tell me," he said, "What do you know the the Prime Minister's assassination?"

"We haven't released much to the public yet," Ven said. He glanced at Kaice, who'd stopped his explanation the moment he'd heard Behn-Kihl-Nahm speak.

Ven and Kaice belonged to totally separate divisions of government, but the younger human still seemed to defer to the older one. The awkward pause lasted only a second though; Ven's eyes darted back to Behn-Kihl-Nahm's and he said, "We were able to analyze debris left behind after the attack, including projectile casing from the missile. The Prime Minister's home was hit with a shoulder-mounted Merr-Sonn launcher, commonly used by New Republic infantry."

That was a bad start. "Was it launched from outside the Prime Minister's compound? My understanding is that those launchers only have a limited range before accuracy tails off, and the space around the compound should have been secured for blocks in every direction."

Ven nodded. "We believe the assailant managed to sneak into the secure area."

"With a shoulder-mounted missile launcher? I hope you're interrogating everyone on the staff that night."

"Believe me, Senator, we are."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm sighed and said, "I assume you're looking at the BIL too."

"That's right. They haven't claimed responsibility for the attack, but, well..." He trailed off, as though embarrassed by his fellow humans.

"I understand." Behn-Kihl-Nahm paused, then asked, "Have you looked into the Patriotic Front?"

"What would the CPF have to gain from killing Pohl-Had-Narr?" asked Kaice.

"Yes, and I know some of my people regarded Pohl-Had-Narr as too... moderate. They may be trying to force a confrontation."

"The BSA has... investigations into both groups," Ven said awkwardly. "That's beyond my need to know, so I couldn't say anything even if I were allowed."

"I understand. Thank you." Behn-Kihl-Nahm placed a hand on the young human's knee. "We're all citizens of Bavinyar. That means we're all in this together."

"Of course. Together," Ven said, though he didn't meet the senator's eyes.

As their armored BSA speeder raced through the streets of Cephalia, Sham-Vi-Diin tried hard not to let the Hortek sitting in front of him consume all his attention. It took some effort; compared to all the other humans and Cereans in the speeder, Pakkpekatt stood out: for his size, for his thick-plated skin, for his slit-like reptilian eyes and sharp predator's teeth. Sham-Vi-Diin had heard that Horteks possessed mild telepathic skills, and he had a feeling that if asked, the NRI agent would neither confirm nor deny.

Despite his large size and intimidating appearance, Pakkpekatt seemed intent on conducting himself like a proper officer. He was saying, "I assure you, Detective, my resources are your disposal. We'll provide you with any help you need in tracking down the culprit behind the Prime Minister's assassination."

"I quite appreciate that," Sham-Vi-Diin said, though he wondered how far it would really go. Director Korr-Mad-Narr had assured the detective that the convoluted galactic-scale political ramifications of this whole mess wouldn't fall on his shoulders; even then, Sham-Vi-Diin hadn't really believed it.

The Hortek's head swiveled on its long neck, and he looked out one tinted viewport, then the other. He asked, "How much of a presence does the BIL have in this city?"

"Some, but their power base is in the islands inhabited by humans, mostly in the southern hemisphere."

"Interesting. I reviewed the files on their leadership structure. Apparently their spokesperson and head is a man named Aviran Kolin."

"That's right. I understand he used to fight for the Rebel Alliance many years ago." He realized how bad that sounded, then added, "Of course, so did many others, including Prime Minister Syne."

"I've heard the minister has a reputation as a moderate. Do you think that's true?"

In truth, Sham-Vi-Diin didn't know much about Syne at all. He didn't follow politics more closely than the average citizen and investigating people with BIL was far outside the purview of a city homicide detective. Figuring Pakkpekatt might be trying to pry some-thing out of him, either verbally or telepathically, he decided on a noncommittal response, saying, "I don't think Pol-Hadd-Narr would have chosen her as vice minister if he didn't think he could work with her."

Pakkpekatt nodded. "I see. So tell me, Kolin hasn't made a statement claiming responsibility for the assassination, has he?"

Sham-Vi-Diin blinked. "I don't believe so, no."

"Don't you think that's curious?"

"He probably figures that an announcement like that will bring the entire New Republic down on him," Sham-Vi-Diin said, then added, "If the BIL is respon-sible."

"Do you think it is?" asked Pakkpekatt pointedly.

The Cerean gave a diplomatic reply. "We haven't seen conclusive evidence either way."

Pakkpekatt's mouth hung open, baring long fangs. It looked threatening the but the hissing sound from the Hortek's throat sounded almost amused. He said, "Tell me, Detective, how is it you are leading this investig-ation? Does the BSA not have any counter-terrorism people they could set on this? I don't mean offense, I'm simply curious."

"None taken. I have some... experience in that field as well. Military forensics, at any rate."

A fan-like crest inflated along the back of Pakk-pekatt's curved spine. Sham-Vi-Diin decided that once he got access to a data terminal he was going to look up primers on Hortek body language, because right now he was all kinds of confused. Which may, he suspected, have been the intention all along.

"Where did you learn this?" the NRI agent asked. "During the war with the Empire?"

Sham-Vi-Diin hesitated; he knew it was pointless. His service record was fully public, and if he really wanted to know, Pakkpekatt could easily look it up. He said, "When I was younger, I worked for Bavinyar's local planetary defense militia."

"The BDF?"

"No. The BDF is made up of humans who once fought for the Rebel Alliance. Before that, we had a Cerean militia." He met the Hortek's intimidating eyes and tried not to flinch. "It was trained and managed by the Empire."

The Hortek's crest flared once, then settled down along his spine. "Ah. I understand now."

"I wanted to protect my homeworld. I did it the only way I could. I was as glad when the Empire died as anyone," he said, and he made himself believe it as he spoke. Deep down, though, there were times when a tiny part of him mourned the end of Imperial rule. Part of it was just an old Cerean's nostalgia; at the same time, things had been much simpler, much *safer* on Bavinyar before the humans started coming back. It had been just a quiet, stable world, far from the intrigues of galactic politics.

Maybe the Hortek could read his unspoken, buried reticence. Hopefully he couldn't. Pakkpekatt gave no sign either way. He asked, "Did you ever see any direct military combat?"

"No. And no major civil unrest either. I'm praying I still won't."

Pakkpekatt bobbed his head and looked out the window at the white cityscape flashing by. "Detective, we all share your prayers."

The sun had just come up over Yavin 4 and was burning mist off the surface of the jungle when the *Millennium Falcon* arrived.

When the landing ramp came down, Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin went first to greet their parents. Han Solo wrapped his daughter in a hug and mussed her hair while Jacen and Anakin, both now taller than their mother, took turns hugging Leia.

Luke Skywalker stood on the edge of it all, watching with an unreadable smile, until Leia went to greet him.

She wrapped her arms around her brother's shoulders, pushed herself onto her toes, and kissed him once on the cheek, but when she pulled away, her face was serious, and so was Uncle Luke's.

"Hey," Han said as he stood with an arm draped on Jaina's shoulder, "Kids, you want to take a look at the *Falcon*? We did some refit jobs on the thrust engines before Chewie went back to Kashyyyk."

Jaina ran a hand through her long brown hair and said, "Actually, I was kinda hoping you could help me with a project Lowie and I have been working on."

"Getting ambitious? That's my girl. Is it the *Lightning Rod*?"

"Nope. *Rock Dragon*."

"Wouldn't mind fixing up another princess' ship. Lead the way, sweetheart. Anakin, Jacen, you guys should come too."

Anakin piped agreement, but Jacen's eyes lingered worryingly on his mother and uncle until Jaina stepped up and tugged on his shoulder. "Come *on*, Jace. We can catch up with Mom later. They've got stuff they need to do."

Leia, a little flustered, turned to her children. "I'm sorry. I didn't meant to be rude. It's just that-"

"We totally understand, Mom," Jaina said, and tugged Jacen's arm again. This time he followed.

Leia felt a small but acute sense of helplessness as she watched her children traipse out of the hangar, leaving her alone with Luke. "They're growing up fast," she whispered, half to herself. "

"Do you feel like you're missing it all?" asked Luke.

Leia sighed and hugged herself. "I just wish I got to see them more often."

"Have you and Han thought about moving here once your term is up? Or is Yavin 4 too isolated for you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know *what* the future's going to bring. It might depend on how the election goes."

It was as good as admitting, *It depends on whether Borsk or Bennie wins*. Of course, her brother probably didn't need Force powers to tell him that. Anyone in the galaxy could have guessed it.

"Once you step down," Luke said, "Do you want to stay on as Alderaan's representative?"

"No. Cal Omas can take my place as the senior senator. He's more than ready." She sighed again. "I'm ready to be done with politics, Luke. The problem is that politics aren't done with me."

"For the moment. I'm hoping we can get through this problem with Bavinyar."

She picked her head and and looked at him. "You know that's why I came here, right?"

"Walk with me," Luke said.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and guided her away from the hangar. As they began to walk through the dark old stone tunnels Leia's mind couldn't help but reel back a quarter-century to when she'd first come to this jungle moon after her escape from the Death Star with men who she'd hardly imagined would end up her brother and husband.

"It was all so simple then, wasn't it?" She couldn't help but sound wistful.

"I wouldn't get nostalgic," Luke said, knowing her meaning. "We almost all died. Biggs and a lot of other good pilots did."

"I know. And I'm not nostalgic for the old days," she said, not really knowing if it was true. "But you have to admit it *was* simpler. The Empire had to be destroyed. We had to kill it or be killed ourselves. We never had any doubts."

"Well, none of us are rebels any more."

Leia nodded as Luke led them out of the hallway and into the open. The hot, damp jungle air dampened her skin but despite it, she felt good. She walked to the edge of the platform they were on and looked out at the jungle and the red sphere of Yavin half-visible through the humid sky. She looked down at the broad clearing in front of the Great Temple where they'd once loaded starfighters and

transports to go fight the Death Star. Now, a handful of Jedi students were practicing light-saber sparring far below.

Gently, Luke said, "If you've come to ask for something, Leia, ask for it."

She sighed. "Oh, Luke, I don't know what I'm asking for. I'm not going to ask for a bunch of Jedi peacekeepers to go to Bavinyar and *make* everyone behave." She glanced over her shoulder and added, "You don't have to look so relieved."

Luke chuckled lightly. "Sorry. I never expected you to make that request anyway."

"Luke, what are your Jedi *for*? You've spent over a decade training students, good students, but we've never really decided what your new Jedi Order is going to *do*."

"It's a hard question. Mon Mothma once told me she wanted Jedi integrated into society on every level. But we don't have nearly enough Jedi, not even if we wanted to place just one person in every sector."

"In the Old Republic, Jedi *were* peacekeepers."

"In the Old Republic, the Jedi were destroyed for precisely that reason," Luke said. The details of the fall of the Jedi order were still not entirely clear to him despite the information he'd picked up from Obi-Wan and Yoda, from his vanished lover Callista and from other stories he'd heard in his long travels through the galaxy. Palpatine had been very thorough at scrubbing the old Order's history from public record and promoting his own anti-Jedi propaganda, but it was clear that the Jedi had acted at the behest of Republic's Chancellor... until that Chancellor became a Sith Lord and had them all eliminated at the end of the Clone Wars. Luke was determined not to make the same mistakes again.

"This is a difficult situation, Luke. We have to be very carefully about how we're seen. The whole galaxy knows we're brother and sister. They also know we're Darth Vader's children. If I *did* call for some kind of Jedi peacekeeping force it would look like nepotism at best, or something a whole lot worse. Right now, our relationship is more political than ever."

"I don't think you came all the way here just to ask me for *nothing*."

"No. I did want to talk. The question is *what* we're going to get from all this. A lot of it's going to depend how Bennie and Gavrisom fare, and how they size up against the new Bavinyari minister, Syne."

"If you're not thinking about sending Jedi peace-keepers, we could send just one or two mediators."

"Yes, that's what I was thinking," Leia nodded. "Preferably someone with diplomatic experience *outside* the Jedi Order. Is Cilghal here?"

She was disappointed when Luke shook his head; the Mon Calamari ambassador-turned-Jedi had been one of her most helpful allies during the Diversity Alliance crisis and was a wise counselor on politics in general.

"Cilghal's still mediating that dispute in the Centrality," he said, naming an isolated, old sector of the galaxy that remained apart from the New Republic. "However, Tresk Im'nel is on Yavin 4 right now."

Leia already knew Im'nel; the brown-furred Bothan had plenty of experience as a New Republic diplomat. As with Cilghal, it had been Leia who first recognized his Force proclivities and directed him to her brother's attention.

Still, she hesitated. Luke clearly saw it. "Is it because Tresk was once Fey'lya's ally?"

"It's not that I don't trust him. He and Borsk haven't been on good terms in years, ever since he switched careers. And he's a good negotiator."

"And a good Jedi," Luke reminded her.

"I know. But it's *because* he and Borsk used to be allies, then had a split. I'm not sure how it would look."

"How *what* would look?" Luke crossed his arms. "What does Fey'lya have to do with Bavinyar?"

"Nothing, but the *election* has a lot to do with Bavinyar."

"If Fey'lya starts arguing that you brought a Jedi to help the peace process just so you could mess with his political campaign, it will only make him look petty."

Luke was right, it would. But Fey'lya might spin it to his advantage anyway and convince everyone he was a victim of some Jedi conspiracy. Again and again, her brother had shown he didn't have the mind to grasp dirty politics. She normally liked that about him, but sometimes it was exasperating.

"If you like," Luke said, "We can talk to Tresk about it and see what he thinks."

Leia nodded. "Okay. I figure it's worth a shot. Lead the way."

Luke nodded, and she followed him back inside the old stone halls of the Great Temple.

Despite having arrived more than half a standard day ahead of the memorial ceremony for Pohl-Had-Narr, the New Republic delegation was not able to meet with the new prime minister beforehand. Behn-Kihl-Nahm tried not to show his dissatisfaction with the fact. Jadesei Syne was very busy, of course, but she'd also known about this delegation, and its timing, for days, and it all seemed like a calculated snub from someone who had to know that getting in good graces with Coruscant was a top priority.

At the very least, Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom were given prime seats for the ceremony. It was taking place in the center of Cephalia's central park. As laid out by the planet's original human settlers over a century ago, the park stretched two kilometers wide and three deep in the middle of the city. A white stone monument had been erected in honor of all the settlers who had died during the voyage to and colonization of the planet; the high obelisk had survived Imperial conquest and had been adopted by the wave of Cerean settlers as a symbol of their own resilience. On a world where every island, every corporation, every gesture seemed coded to one race or another, this one monument was something both sides could claim and respect.

So, Behn-Kihl-Nahm thought, it was a good gesture. A good start. He and Gavrisom were seated on the stands at the base of the

monument, looking out on the speaker's podium and, beyond that, the throngs of people. He'd never seen the park this full; he could barely spot any patches of green grass between the monument and the park's edge. The ceremony hadn't started yet and they were a nosy crowd. Some seemed to be marching, others singings. Some people in the distance seemed to be banging drums. In such a chaotic mess of beings he had a hard time telling Cereans from humans; it all seemed a jumble. As long as the blue-uniformed BSA officers interspersed throughout the crowd kept the peace, Behn-Kihl-Nahm saw that mingling as a good sign.

Gavrisom leaned close and whispered in his ear, "Do you hear that? They're about to begin."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm blinked. "Begin what?"

Before the Calibop answered he heard it: the whine of distant thrust engines. He pivoted and looked behind and upward. He spotted them just as they came soaring low over the park: five T-wing fighters, hulls painted a dazzling ocean-blue. The fighters trailed streams of white smoke, and as they passed over the park they corkscrewed around each other, spiraling their smoke-trails before breaking off in five directions.

The crowd applauded, seemingly in unison, but someone kept on beating those drums in the distance.

The clapping faded as General Kaice, in his brown-and-gold BDF dress uniform, stepped up to the podium. The human leaned in close over the micro-phone; when he cleared his throat it echoed over dozens of loudspeakers posted on high pillars across the park.

The general said, "We have come here today as Bavinyari to remember one of our own. Prime Minister Pohl-Had-Narr was a being who believed in this world. He believed in its people. He believed that we could come together from all walks of life, from all the distant stars, and build a better Bavinyar, together."

That drew a ripple of applause, and Kaice paused for it to run its course. When it had, he said, "At this time, Pohl-Had-Narr's chosen Vice Minister a successor, Jadesei Syne, would like to say a few words."

Kaice stepped aside to another round of applause, but Behn-Kihl-Nahm could also make out the sound of angry boos. Those far-off drums seemed to be beating even louder.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm leaned forward just a little as the new Prime Minister stepped up to the podium. He was taken aback to see her, too, dressed in the gold-and-brown BDF uniform. He knew she'd had a commission, just as she'd fought for the Dorneans and New Republic, but he'd always seen her in formal civilian garb.

Syne stood in the middle of a BDF honor guard in the same uniforms, six on either side with ceremonial slug-thrower rifles hanging off their shoulders. As a Cerean, he found the image chilling. The BSA had made progress in creating a racially mixed police force, but the BDF was undeniably a human-led, human-run organization, viewed with lingering mistrust by most Cereans. The sight before them now would do little to calm anxieties.

Syne herself was a small woman, hardly intimidating physically, with a round face and long black hair tied at the back of her neck. She stood at the podium for a moment, head lifted high, like she was scanning all the thousands of faces in the crowd before her. Then she said, "It is with great sadness that I stand before you today. Pohl-Had-Narr was an inspiration to us all, and just he united us in life he unites us now in grief."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm released a breath. At least she seemed intent on saying the right things.

"When Pohl-Had-Narr came to me and asked me to be his Vice Minister," she continued, "I have to admit that I was surprised. I was even skeptical. Because I grew up a soldier, I had never held politicians in high esteem. I examined our interactions for some signs of duplicity or ulterior motive.

"I now feel ashamed of that. I understand now, perhaps too late, that Pohl-Had-Narr had only one goal in mind: the creation of a unified Bavinyar. The ones who struck against him like cowards in the night, the ones who cruelly murdered not just the Prime Minister but his family and friends, they sought to tear us apart. They thought that one act of savagery could rend the fabric of our

society and turn Bavinyari against Bavinyari. In doing so they've showed their contempt for us all.

"I stand before you today to tell you to not let them succeed. *I* will not let them. I will not dishonor the trust of the man who who trusted me."

That brought a round of applause from the audience. It washed across the park and Behn-Kihl-Nahm found himself joining in. Syne paused, head held high, and waited for it to subside. In the distance, someone was pounding those drums faster and faster.

When she was finally ready, Syne said, "Before we look to the future we should remember the past. We should remember the kind of being Pohl-Had-Narr was, so that we might better carry on his legacy."

As Syne continued to speak of Pohl-Had-Narr, Behn-Kihl-Nahm noticed that the drumming had ceased, as though it had built itself to a climax and abruptly stopped. He saw figures jostling their way through the crowd, as though they were trying to edge closer to the podium. Syne went on as though she didn't seem them but the honor guards lined to either side of her tensed; a few unslung their rifles and clasped them in both arms.

"Pohl-Had-Narr felt called to politics at a young age," Syne was saying, "when Bavinyar was still under the heel of Imperial oppression. Unlike so many, he-"

"Justice!" someone whooped from the front of the crowd, "Justice for blood!"

Behn-Kihl-Nahm saw something small arcing through the air. It landed on the platform and bounced once before the guard closest to Syne threw himself on it. His body only partially muffled the explosion; a flash of light blinded Behn-Kihl-Nahm; a roar deafened his ears and smoke filled his lungs. He struggled to his feet only for the familiar feeling of Gavrisom's prehensile feather-trips to grab him by both shoulders and pull him to the ground. As his face smashed against the cold metal of the bench he could make out the sharp tang of blaster-fire. He'd never been a soldier but he still recognized the familiar sound of classic BlasTech E-11 rifles, the Empire's favorite. After the first volley of E-11 fire a barrage of

thunder cracked through the air. People started running, screaming. There was another burst of thunder, and only then did Behn-Kihl-Nahm realize the sound was coming from the honor guards' ceremonial slug-thrower rifles.

The second round seemed to have been enough; no more shots were fired. When he realized that Gavrisom was no longer holding him down, Behn-Kihl-Nahm rose to his feet and surveyed the scene.

The crowd was still trying to get as far away from the podium as possible. A half-dozen bodies were left behind by the stampede: one human and five Cereans. He couldn't tell who had been shot and who had not. He shifted his attention to the podium; two guards were helping Syne rise on wobbling legs. Blood was running down her forehead, streaking red down her ash-coated face, but she didn't look critically damaged. Another guard was helping General Kaice stand; the human was clutching a blaster-wound on his shoulder. A few centimeters closer to his heart and he'd have been dead.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm heard alarm wailing in the distance, and the roar of the T-wings making another low pass. The drums had stopped.

Gavrisom placed his wingtip on Behn-Kihl-Nahm's shoulder. The Cerean gave a start, and spun around to look at the minister's black, unreadable avian eyes.

"We must speak to the Princess," he said, "Right away."

—CHAPTER FIVE—

Senator Avan Beruss had always known, deep down, that he'd follow the example of his father and take up a career in politics. It's what he was born for, the role Clan Beruss had fulfilled for Illodia for centuries. He'd never expected to inherit his father's role the way he had, ushered into office in a snap vote held just days after Doman Beruss, and many other representatives, had been killed in a terrorist bombing of the Senate hall.

His father's waning years had taken a toll on the family. The old senator had taken a stance opposing Leia Organa Solo during the Black Fleet Crisis, going so far as to submit a petition for her ouster. Doman's relationship with Leia had never recovered from that, despite all the time Leia had spent on the Beruss estate as a child and teenager. When forming her most recent government, Leia had offered Avan a cabinet position, perhaps as a way of making amends, and starting things off on a better foot. He'd felt a little ashamed of that, but also glad. It was important to have friends, especially in the messy world of interstellar politics.

He was grateful that Leia had tasked him with keeping her informed on the undercurrents of Coruscant politics while she was away, but he didn't take the responsibility lightly. He kept all his feelers open regarding Fey'lya, Pwoe, and Celch Dravvad, trying to find out what moves the other candidates would make while Behn-Kihl-Nahm was away on Bavinyar. He learned that Fey'lya had met with Senator C-Gosf of Gosfambling and Fyor Rodan of Commenor at one of Galactic City's most exclusive restaurants for lunch, and that Pwoe had visited the offices of Viqi Sesh, the new junior senator from Kuat. C-Gosf and Rodan had already been leaning toward supporting Fey'lya in the election, so that wasn't surprising; Sesh was still something of a wildcard and it wasn't clear if Pwoe had accomplished anything with her. Dravvad had already released a statement right before Leia left, a bland admonishment for restraint on all parties during the investigation on Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination.

He piped this information directly to the *Millennium Falcon*, and while it felt good to sidestep Nanaod Engh, Leia's persistent gatekeeper, he'd gotten no replies and could only trust Leia that was taking all this into account.

The memorial ceremony for Bavinyar's late prime minister took place early in the morning, Galactic City time, and Avan had gathered his aides in his office to watch the broadcast. It was being carried on all the major networks, something that would normally have been unheard of for one dead politician on one barely-populated backwater planet. He periodically cycled through the channels, trying to tell which network gave Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom the most airtime, or which color commentators evinced certain opinions. He noted dispassionately that human ones tended to show more sympathy for Syne and Bavinyar's human population, while non-humans were more sympathetic to the Pohl-Had-Narr and the Cereans. It was predictable and depressing, but he'd grown used to it since joining the senate.

What he hadn't predicted was the sudden burst of violence that cut the ceremony short when it had barely begun. The moment he got a full grasp of the situation-Syne alive, Gavrisom and Bennie

alive, BDF chief Kaice wounded, three BDF guards dead, six killed in the crowd, identity and number of attackers unknown- he dismissed his staff and dialed up the *Falcon*.

He stopped short of placing the call, because he had no idea what to say.

Neither, apparently, did anyone else. Many senators, including Dravvad and Pwoe, sent out blanket statements of 'grave concern' for the situation on Bavinyar and urged calmer heads on all sides. Fey'lya, notably, sent out no immediate comment, and that was enough to raise Avan's suspicions.

His statement finally came in the late afternoon. There was no warning; the news networks simply cut into their programming, which was already all about Bavinyar anyway, to show Senator Fey'lya, dressed in mournful dark-red robes, sitting behind his desk with his paws clasped in front of him, leaning forward slightly, speaking to the audience in the calm, measured tones of a parent reassuring his children.

"By now, I am sure that many of you have learned of the latest unrest on the planet Bavinyar. It is terrible that another tragedy had afflicted that poor planet in the space of days, and as other senators have already said, we must be mindful of their grief, and deeply concerned about the continuing situation there.

"However, I believe mere concern is not enough in a situation like this. I believe the New Republic should take a more active hand in settling the situation on Bavinyar. I believe that in a situation like this, where civil unrest is spiraling out of control, the New Republic has a duty to ensure the lives of its members. With that in mind, I will soon be introducing legislation in the Senate to muster a peacekeeping expedition to Bavinyar.

"I am sure many of you see this as a drastic step. Some of you surely call it too drastic. Why, you ask, should the sons and daughters of Corellia, Commenor, Kuat, and Bothawui put their lives at risk for a world like Bavinyar? Well, I can only say this. The New Republic is a union of planets large and small. We all owe a responsibility to each other, and violence on one world weakens all others. I am sure that, in light of today's events, President Organa

Solo, Minister Gavisom, and Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm are already considering a peacekeeping expedition. Because none of them are on Coruscant at the moment, I will act in their stead and submit a motion to the Senate.

"I am broadcasting this information because I believe it is important that our government be transparent in its goals and motivations. The Senate is not some isolated body, locked in a tower, far from the beings who elect it. It exists to serve the people, and today it is important that all people be aware of the issues, the stakes, and the responsibility we all owe each other.

"There may be difficult times ahead, but I believe justice and order will prevail on Bavinyar. I believe that because I believe in the Republic. I believe in what the martyrs of Bothawui and so many other worlds died to create in the long struggle against the Empire. We prevailed then, and we will prevail tomorrow.

"Thank you, and good night."

Avan watched it all in his own office. When it was done he turned the holo-projector off, waved aside his aides, and went home.

The Beruss family estate on Coruscant was a city unto itself, vastly larger than the land the family claimed on Illodia itself. The Beruss family had, by some unspoken rule, occupied the role of Illodia's representatives on Coruscant for generations. Growing up, Avan Beruss had spent as much time in Imperial City as he had on Illodia, and he'd mapped every square meter of the estate in his head twenty years ago, when he'd been a child seeking out every hidden room, every secret tunnel under the gardens, every locked passageway.

Now he was an adult, and somewhat to his surprise, he'd fallen fully into the role of his father and grandfather. He'd wanted something more than that when he was younger, which was why he'd joined Rogue Squadron and flown in combat against the Empire. Once the war started to settle down, he'd accepted civilian life, and begun working as his father's aide in the recreated Senate, and later his successor.

He'd retained some that independent streak, though; Illodian tradition held for him to take multiple wives, typically from the other noble families of the home-world. Instead, and despite his father's objections, he'd taken only one: former Rogue Squadron wingmate Feylis Ardele, from Commenor. Feylis had stayed in the military, though now she piloted a desk at the NRDF's logistics office on Coruscant.

She arrived just after he did. Her long blonde hair was pulled to the back of her neck, revealing a sagging face and tired eyes. She dropped beside him onto the sofa of their personal chambers without turning on the holo-projector. Neither wanted to see any more news today.

"Have you talked to the Princess yet?" asked Feylis as she rested her head against his shoulder.

"No. Not since she left. I've been sending her messages, but..." He sighed. "Today caught me off-guard."

"It caught everyone off-guard."

"Even Fey'lya?"

"Fey'lya could scheme in his sleep. It comes naturally to him."

A long pause spread between them. Eventually Avan said, "He's staked a strong position now. Intervention. I'd have thought he'd wait for things to get *really* bad."

"He wants to put Behn-Kihl-Nahm and the princess on the spot. Did you like how he did that, make it seem like they were derelict in their duties? Behn-Kihl-Nahm almost got blown up today."

After another pause, Avan asked, "Do you think he's wrong? About intervention?"

The next pause was even longer. When he thought Feylis wouldn't respond, she sighed a long sigh and said, "I think we'll find out soon enough."

The next time Iella and Asyr met it was in a different drinking establishment on the other end of Treasure Ship Row. This one was smaller, a little more seedy, and it felt more crowded when they met at the end of the day.

Wedge had come back to Coronet City by then, and Iella told him she was meeting up with an old coworker from her NRI days, one she hadn't seen in a very long time. It was, more or less, true, but it still felt like lying, and Iella still felt awful.

When she'd agreed, fifteen years back, to keep Asyr's survival a tightly-guarded secret, she'd known that would mean hiding it from people she cared about, including Wedge and poor Gavin Darklighter. By the time she got around to actually marrying Wedge years later, Asyr had drifted out of her life and out of her mind. She wondered now whether she could have made that promise if she'd been as close to Wedge then as she was now.

As for Asyr, she seemed even more edgy than last time. They sat in a dark booth at the rear end of the bar. Asyr must have dyed the normal white streak in her fur black, because now she seemed night-dark, like she could just dissolve in the booth's deep shadows. Nonetheless, her small bright eyes kept darting over Iella's shoulder, to the holo-projector next to the bar-counter that was currently re-broadcasting Celch Dravvad's speech. Iella had already seen it before heading out; it had had no substance in terms of policy and had clearly been thrown together after Fey'lya's surprise statement. Pwoe had put one out as well; as for poor Behn-Kihl-Nahm, he'd put no word out. Likely he had more to do on Bavinyar than just posture.

"Do you doubt what I told you now?" Asyr asked in a low voice. "The timing of Fey'lya's speech was too good."

Iella shook her head. She didn't want to come out and call Asyr paranoid; she had good reason to hate Fey'lya after what he'd done to her and Gavin. "Fey'lya is an opportunist. Besides, before you told me he was supplying the *human* separatists. It looks like this attack was done by Cerean extremists."

"Fey'lya is trying to sow chaos and embarrass Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Organa Solo. And it's working. There's been reports of more riots in Bavinyar's capital."

"I hadn't heard that," Iella said. In truth, she'd been trying to avoid more news from that world.

"I have to go to the planet," Asyr insisted, "And I need to find proof of what's going on."

"A Bothan's going to stand out no matter what."

"I know. But I had no desire to pass as a native anyway."

"I can't get you false identification codes. I'm not even with NRI anymore and even if I were they're impossible to manufacture."

"I was expecting that," Asyr said. If she was disappointed it didn't show.

Iella sighed and reached into her jacket pocket. She took out a datacard and slid it across the table. "I was able to get in touch with a friend who's still active. This is what I could pull about the team we just sent with Gavisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm."

Asyr's black paw swiped out and took it. "Confidential?"

"Nothing high-grade, but it's what she could get. Most of it is just from NRI's fact file about Bavinyar and its politics. Lot of stuff you could glean from the news nets, and some stuff you can't, including info on the BIL and CPF extremist groups."

"You mean their leaders?" Asyr asked. "Their suppliers?"

"Nothing about external agents. I don't think NRI was investigating them too closely before all this blew up." Iella added, "You should look at the personnel files for the three NRI staffers they sent."

"Anyone you know?"

"I knew their leader, Colonel Pakkpekatt. Big, fierce-looking Hortek. Some telepathic abilities. Don't get too close to him."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Have you arranged passage to Bavinyar yet?"

"I have a ship of my own."

"Any friends you'll be taking with you?"

Asyr stared and said nothing.

"I'm sorry." Iella waved a hand. "I didn't want to know anyway. There's one more thing, though." She took out a second data-chip and passed it across the table. "There's only one thing on that one. It's an encryption code. It routes directly to my personal comm. If you need my help, if you think there's any-thing I should know, if you just want to talk to a friend, call me."

Asyr took it and smiled softly. It was the first smile Iella had seen from her in fifteen years. "It's good to have friends."

"You can't manage without them. So just... keep in touch. Please."

Asyr pocketed the second datachip and looked Iella in the eye. "Thank you for all of this. But there's one more thing I have to know."

Her gaze wavered, softened, but didn't break. Iella said, "Gavin's all right. He's in charge of Rogue Squadron now."

"I heard that. I'm glad he doesn't have to fight any more."

"He's married," Iella added softly. "And he's adopted two children."

Asyr's gaze finally broke. Her eyes dropped to the table, where her claws dug into the black-painted wood. She whispered, "We talked about adopting, once. Back before..."

Iella reached out and squeezed her paw. "It's all right. He's happy now. And you'll be happy too, once you take down Fey'lya. You'll be free."

Asyr's violet eyes flicked up again. She blinked away tears and said, "Do you really believe that, Iella?"

"I do," she said, and hoped her friend couldn't see through her lie.

They gathered on the roof of the Great Temple. The forest spread out in all directions far beneath them, while heavy wet clouds spanned the sky. They looked like they meant rain, but so far there'd been no water and no thunder.

But a storm was still coming.

"Given the news that just came in from Bavinyar," Leia told the Jedi around her, "I think I need to head there right away."

"Couldn't that be construed as showing a lack of faith in Gavrisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm?" asked Mara.

Leia nodded. "It could. But if I *don't* act then I'll look weak, and so will they by extension. Fey'lya's already made his move. I've talked to some people on Coruscant and they'll do their best to get his vote delayed. I don't think many senators are going to be eager

to start sending in peacekeepers into a messy situation like this, so I think they'll be able to stop it."

"That seemed a little bold for Fey'lya," said Kenth Hamner, a former New Republic military officer turned Jedi. "He has to know that other senators are going to be wary of drastic action. So why call for a vote that probably won't pass?"

"Fey'lya is no fool," said Tresk Im'nel, who used to work under the Bothan senator in the New Republic diplomatic corps. "Most likely he expects his call for a vote to be blocked."

"I don't get it," Han said. "Why call it at all?"

"He's staking out his position," Im'nel explained. "If we can solve this problem without sending in peace-keepers then at least he's raised his profile before the election, more so than Pwoe and Dravvad, who've refrained from making clear policy statements on Bavinyar. And if things *do* get worse, well, I'm sure we'll be hearing lots of 'I told you so.'"

Leia nodded. "Borsk is a smart player. He knows he needs to stake out a position oppose Bennie since they're the two frontrunners. Bavinyar is probably going to push more votes away from Pwoe and Dravvad the longer they delay taking a stance. Borsk is just gambling he's picked the right one."

"And naturally he picks the opposite one as Bennie," Han sighed. "How do we know the little furball doesn't have a paw in this somehow?"

Leia said, "I've known Borsk a long time, and he's never committed anything outright treasonous."

"There's a first time for everything," Han muttered.

"I agree with Leia," said Im'nel. "I've known Fey'lya even longer. He's a consummate opportunist, but he prefers to take advantage of crises rather than start them."

"*Prefer*," Han scowled. "Leia, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Assuming treason against a New Republic senator without evidence is a big step," Luke admonished them.

"Ignoring it is just plain stupid," Han insisted.

"I never said I'm going to ignore it. I have people on Coruscant who will make sure the vote is blocked. And I'll be going to Bavinyar shortly."

"You mean *we'll* be going," Han said.

"Yes," Leia said, "*We*. I'd like Kenth and Tresk to come too, if they're willing."

The Bothan's ears flattened on his skull; Hamner said, "In what capacity? Some... Jedi negotiating team?"

"You're Luke's liaison to the NRDF, aren't you?"

"I am. Technically, they're holding me in reserve with a colonel's rank."

"Then your Commander in Chief orders you to come to Bavinyar with her to advise on orders of potential military importance. Understood?"

Hamner nodded. Im'nel asked, "What about me? I no longer have any official rank in the New Republic."

"Nonetheless I ask you to come as my advisor."

"To investigate Fey'lya?"

"To advise me. You're to keep your ears open and you're to help with the investigation in the Bavinyar militants who are behind this mess. If there is some link between them and Fey'lya- which I pray there *isn't*- I want you to find that too. Understood?"

"Very much so." Im'nel bowed his head slightly.

Leia reached out and placed a hand on her brother's arm. "And your job is to hold the fort down here, understood?"

"Of course," Luke nodded, "Unless you want to borrow more Jedi."

"Bringing two to Bavinyar with me will cause enough ripples through the political sphere. Bringing my brother the Jedi Master in to solve all my problems would be too much."

"I understand, Leia."

She squeezed his arm. "Thank you. I appreciate that, Luke, I really do."

—CHAPTER SIX—

All things considered, Avan Beruss was surprised at how well the senate session was going.

It started out in bedlam, of course, because everyone knew that Senator Fey'lya would try to push through a vote that would authorize the NRDF to send a peacekeeping force to Bavinyar. Once Mif Kumas, the broad-winged Calibop sergeant-at-arms was able to quiet the crowd, Fey'lya himself went up to the speaker's central podium and began to read through his proposed legislation.

As he sat in the seat for Illodia's senior representative, listening carefully to Fey'lya, Avan got his first surprise of the day. The proposal was actually quite brief and surprisingly vague. The legislature authorized use of military force to pacify any civil unrest on Bavinyar, without specifying what kind of civil unrest or what level of force. It contained specific provisions leaving the dispensation of said force to the NRDF hierarchy, which Avan thought pretty generous given Fey'lya's long-standing poor relations with Admiral Ackbar. He supposed the Bothan was leaving himself

political wriggle-room so that his old nemesis could take the blame if any intervention went bad.

After Fey'lya read the proposal, he stepped down so that the legislation could be discussed. With both Leia and Behn-Kihl-Nahm offworld, the session was being chaired by security minister Miatamia. Even though Miatamia was typically in Fey'lya's camp, the Diamalan ran the talks formally, giving no indication as to his biases. Avan wasn't sure whether to be encouraged by that or not.

As expected, one of Fey'lya's other allies spoke more firmly on the matter. Niuk Niuv began with a forceful condemnation of all violent on Bavinyar, reminded everyone how the crisis in the Farlax and Corellian sectors had been allowed to spiral out-of-control due to inaction, then laid subtle hints that the planet's humans were really to blame. Avan was a little frightened by how much applause Niuv got.

Celch Dravvad took the podium next, and all the hundreds of holo-cam droids floating around the senate hall inched a little closer to get better shots of the presidential candidate giving his long-awaited policy speech.

"I understand better than anyone what internal strife can do to the politics of a New Republic member system," Dravvad said, "But I must remind you that the situations here, in Koornacht, and in the Corellian system are all very different. The crisis in Koornacht was caused by a genocidal race armed with a fleet of Imperial warships. I *must* add, also, that the unrest on Corellia was not, in fact, instigated by Corellians, but the Saccorian Triad, who exploited dormant tensions for their own gain."

Avan had to smirk at that; Dravvad was clearly irked and Avan couldn't blame him. All the newsnets were comparing the Bavinyar Crisis (as they'd already started calling it) to the one on Corellia six years previously, and no representative liked to see his home sector held up as an example of dysfunction.

"Bavinyar is *not* Corellia," Dravvad went on, "And it is *not* Koornacht. It is an internal political crisis on a single lightly-populated planet. A small NRDF task force would contain enough firepower to obliterate the world entirely. This is not the Empire,

gentlebeings. This is the Republic, and the Republic does not respond to small agitations with overwhelming force. Our best diplomats, including Princess Leia herself, are already handling the matter personally. A show of military force would only exacerbate tensions that could otherwise be defused easily. That is why we must all vote *no* on Senator Fey'lya's proposal."

Dravvad got a lot of applause too, but Avan wasn't sure if it beat Niuv's. As far as enthusiastic ovations went, neither was especially impressive. That wasn't surprising; the situation on Bavinyar was messy and most galactic citizens, to say nothing of their representatives, were confused and wary of getting involved in conflicts on minor planets.

Avan was hoping the senators would pay heed to their electorate. Third to the podium was the lynchpin of it all. Avan and Cal Omas had talked it out beforehand; Avan himself was too young to command the whole senate's respect and Omas, as Alderaan's junior senator and de facto sole representative, was seen as too closely tied with Leia. Other senators could have also thrown their support behind Leia; Oolos' Tolik Yarr had already offered what Avan didn't doubt would be an aggressive full-throated rebutal of Fey'lya's proposal. However, Avan and Omas had decided a more subtle touch was preferable. They'd both agreed another senator should make their case to the galaxy. Thankfully, when they'd approached him about it, Senator Elegos A'kla of the Caamasi Remnant had been eager to help.

Less than five years ago, 'Justice for Caamas' had been the rallying cry for both sides of a conflict that had nearly torn the galaxy apart. Unlike so many senators, Elegos A'kla had not gone frothing for vengeance over the destruction of his homeworld decades before. In promoting a peaceful resolution, both for that crisis and the war with the Empire, A'kla had emerged as a voice of moral authority that no one in the senate dared challenge openly. Though he knew the Caamasi would be horrified at the comparison, Avan couldn't help but think of him as a secret weapon.

"They call this senate a deliberative body," A'kla said, "But so often I've seen us dissolve into petty arguments fueled more by anger and ego than the desire to see justice. We came very close to tearing ourselves apart not five years ago, all in the name of Caamasi a half-century dead. In the end, we allowed ourselves to be manipulated by agents of chaos. We should not fall victim to the same haste again.

"Senator Niuv has said that we should act not because the situation may get far worse. I acknowledge his wisdom; if we'd acted sooner in Koornacht, millions would have been saved. Senator Dravvad says that we should trust our diplomats, because a Republic that rules by the gun is no Republic at all. He, too, is wise.

"The situation on Bavinyar is complicated. We've said it again and again, but I must repeat it. It is more complicated- politically, historically, and *morally*- than the crises over Koornacht, Corellia, or even Caamas. That is why, more than ever, we should not act in haste.

"I do not propose to turn down the motion. I do not propose to vote in its favor. What I promise is that we *wait*. As Senator Dravvad said, our three best diplomats are on Bavinyar now, doing what they do best. A vote to send military force to Bavinyar would be a flagrant disrespect of the decades of loyal service which Princess Leia, Gavrisom, and Behn-Kihl-Nahm have given the Republic. And yet, as Senator Niuv said, we must not shirk from intervention when it is truly warranted, and when it could truly save lives.

"But that time is not now. I propose a vote to table the proposal. If it passes this first vote, *then* let us consider it in more detail, preferably with input from the Security Council and NRDF leadership. But please, I urge you all to wait and give our best a chance to bring to Bavinyar, as they have to countless other worlds already."

When A'kla crossed his long forearms over his chest, signaling and end to his speech, Avan was the first on his feet to applaud; Cal Omas was about a quarter-second behind. He was hardly alone, and

Avan's heart swelled when the Caamasi's speech got the loudest ovations of all.

Senator A'kla, though, betrayed nothing on his downy face as he took his seat and folded his hands calmly in his lap. And, when the motion to delay the vote passed a half-hour later, A'kla was the first to rise to his feet and leave the senate hall without a word.

Avan made his way over to the Alderaanian seat and gave Cal Omas a firm slap on the back.

"That went perfectly," the older man grinned. "Now Leia and company can do their jobs."

Avan smiled back. "For a moment there I was worried. Niuv came out attacking right away."

"Niuv is a probably hoping he can get a better cabinet position if Fey'lya's in charge. Say, State or Defense ministries."

"That could still happen," Avan warned. "Depending on what happens once Leia gets to Bavinyar."

"I know." Omas' smile wilted. "Still, we did what we had to. If we have more problems, we can deal with those as they come."

"I know," Avan exhaled. "I was just tense."

"Remind you of your days back in the cockpit?" Omas asked. Once upon a time, the Alderaanian, too, had flown X-wings.

"I guess there was a little of that excitement."

"A little? We're playing for higher stakes now."

The thought sobered Avan. He looked across the busy senate chamber until he spotted Fey'lya, huddled in close conversation with Miatamia and his junior senator, Mak Sezala. The younger Bothan's fur stood on end as though agitated, but Fey'lya himself looked quite calm. Avan wasn't the best at reading Bothan body language, so he wasn't positive, but that was how it seemed to him.

Omas, apparently, had followed his gaze. The man said, "Don't be surprised. I think Fey'lya got exactly what he wanted."

"What do you mean?"

"He made his stand and got lots of attention. If this ends peacefully he'll shrug it off and everybody will forget, if and it *doesn't*, well, he'll get to say, 'I told you so.'"

Avan's mouth went dry. Sometimes he forgot what a canny player the Bothan was.

"But we can't do anything about that now," Omas said as he put a hand on Avan's shoulder. "For now, we wait, and we trust Leia."

Avan did trust her, more than perhaps anyone he'd ever met. He wished that alone could get the heavy feeling out of his gut.

The recent tumult in the New Republic Senate had been watched with unusual closeness by the people of far-off Bavinyar. The result was met with relief by the vast majority of the population, which, for once, left the humans and Cereans in actual agreement.

The agreement, however, was not total, as Detective Aryon Ven was surprised to discover when he took a day off the investigation to return to his family's island in the southern hemisphere.

Ven had enjoyed a brief spurt of celebrity after it had been announced on news-nets all over the galaxy that he was was a senior investigator into Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination. The mess created by the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Syne had immediately taken attention away from her predecessor's death, and while Ven and Sham-Vi-Diin continued to trudge through their investigation, they hadn't been making much progress; combined with the sudden dearth of public attention it was why Ven had been able to winnow a day to go down south.

The island on which he'd grown up was much as he remembered: the cool and damp weather was far less pleasant than sunny, tropical Cephalia, not to mention far smaller. His parents, who'd been born as farmers on one of the Cerean-occupied islands in the northern hemisphere, had settled down on this island to repeat the process.

Weather and soil were both a poor match for farming here, but they trudged on. Now that Ven was gone it was just the two of them, and they relied on droids to staff the rest of their land. Despite increasing age, though, both parents were quite hale, and on the morning of his return his mother and father took him down the trail leading to the rocky cliffsides that plunged down into crashing waves.

He'd gotten used to balmy Cephalia, and he tugged his jacket tight around him and they walked. His father noticed this, and said with a dry chuckle, "You're getting soft up north, aren't you?"

"No I'm not," Ven insisted. "I just forgot how cool it could get here."

"It's bound to happen," his mother said. "Well, you look much the same otherwise, so it's good to see Cephalia hasn't changed you too much."

"When I saw that broadcast," his father said, "I could hardly recognize you."

"You've seen me in my BSA uniform before."

"It wasn't that. I'm used to seeing you as a tough tall lad, but next to all those cone-heads you looked a positively puny. Not your fault, I suppose."

"Tell me, what's he like, the one you're working with?" his mother said. "Sham-Vi-Miin?"

"Sham-Vi-*Diin*," Ven corrected. "He's the head of the homicide department. He's been my boss for the past five years."

"Well, how are you and the *boss* getting along?"

Ven wasn't sure how to answer that. Generally, he and the chief hadn't gotten along either well or badly; the older Cerean was an aloof commander in general, and Ven had always felt insecure around him, unsure if he was being singled out to be ignored, if it was because he was young or because he was human.

He said, "Sham-Vi-*Diin*'s very professional, Mom."

"What does *that* mean?" pried his father.

"Just what I said. He's career police."

"Does this mean he used to work for the Imps when they ran the planet?"

"I think so," Ven said softly. "But a lot of the Cereans did. It was the only option they had, with the Empire watching over Bavinyar then."

"There's always excuses," his father snorted.

"The Empire's long gone, you know," his mother said. "No use going on about a dead thing."

"Not so dead. Son, did you hear the rumor that the Imps are supplying guns to the terrorists?"

Like most humans on Bavinyar, his father used *terrorist* as a synonym for Palt-Ri-Gen's CPF extremists, or, more broadly, any Cerean he didn't like. He'd even used the term for Pohl-Had-Narr now and then, even though the dead prime minister had been as accom-modating to humans as anyone could expect a Cerean to act.

"I've heard the rumor," Ven acknowledged.

"Well? Is it true?"

It was, but he wasn't going to tell that to his father. It would get him going off on terrorists all the more, and besides, it wasn't the sort of police intelligence he should have been sharing with civilians, family or not.

"I'm not sure," he said vaguely. "I'm not investigating that part. I think the Republic is actually more involved there."

"The Republic," his father echoed noncommittally. "Well, I'll give them one thing. They know when not to get involved. So they're *smarter* than the Imps. Did you watch that senate session?"

"I missed it, sorry."

"It's all your dad's been talking about," his mother put in. "Never used to pay so much attention to politics."

"We never used to be so important the whole damned galaxy's watching our every move." His father shook his head. "This isn't what I thought I'd get when we moved back here, son."

"What did you think we'd get?"

"My grandfather took us out to Bavinyar because he wanted to get away from the Republic. He and the other settlers wanted to live peacefully and be left alone. That's all he wanted and it's all I want too."

Ven looked out at the gray cliffs and the vast sea beyond. "You seem pretty alone here."

"To a city boy, maybe," his father chuckled. "Well, I'm just glad the senate made the right vote. I can't imagine what a mess this would be if that furry fellow was calling the shots."

"Well, he's not. The *actual* Chief of State is coming to Cephalia tomorrow. I'll have to be there. I'll catch a jumper back north in the morning."

"I'm glad *she's* coming and not the furball," his father said. "She'd never press some crazy intervention scheme. She has a good head on her shoulders."

"How do people feel up in Cephalia?" asked his mother. "Do they want the Republic to get involved?"

"No more than it already is," Ven said.

"Even the people you work for?" asked his father.

"Definitely. If the Republic has to intervene in Bavinaryi affairs it hurts the legitimacy of everyone- the BSA, the BDF, the prime minister." He added with an ironic smile, "We're all stuck in the same speeder now."

"Well, *that's* good to hear." His father sounded relieved. "This way we might even solve our own problems."

Ven's mother made a noncommittal humming sound. He asked, "What is it, Mom?"

"Oh, your mother's developed a sudden love for the Republic," his father said.

"Really, Mom?" Ven stopped walking to look at her. "I mean, did you want Fey'lya to send in peacekeepers?"

"I don't know about *that*," he said, hugging herself against a cold breeze. "It's just that.... This situation is ugly. No side in this- the BSA, the BDF, Syne, the terrorist groups- want to back down but they all want to get what they want. Everyone has a special interest here."

"And the Republic doesn't?" Ven's father asked. "You can be sure Fey'lya wants to blame all the problems here on us evil humans, and let the terrorists get away with everything."

"Fey'lya, maybe, but Behn-Kihl-Nahm's never gone in for that kind of rhetoric. You know he could have if he wanted to."

"Maybe," Ven admitted, "But what Dad says is true. The Republic's not a neutral party in this. There *are* no neutral parties."

"Not even the BSA?" she asked.

He felt like he'd walked into a trap. He sighed and said, "I've never been into politics either. I just want to find whoever killed Pohl-Had-Narr. That's my job. That's it. Everything else... It's just not my business."

"Not your business?" his father echoed thoughtfully. "Hmmm. You sound like the one true neutral being on Bavinyar."

"Nobody's natural. I just worry about what I can change and let other people worry about what they think *they* can change."

His mother smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. "That's good, son. If there were more like you, we probably wouldn't be in this mess."

Ven wanted to believe that. He hoped it was true, but in the end, it didn't matter, because most people *weren't* like him.

"Maybe it's a good thing they aren't," he said, trying to sound cheery. "Otherwise, I'd be out of a job."

His parents nodded, like that was some consolation, but they all knew it wasn't close to enough.

The *Millennium Falcon* landed at the spaceport south of Cephalia to a grand welcome totally inappropriate for an ancient cobbled-together tramp freighter. It should have felt incongruous, but by now Leia was used to it, even if the show always made Han shift a little uncomfortably in his seat.

Along with Kenth Hamner and Tresk Im'nel, they were met by Minister Gavrisom as well as a set of representatives from the Bavinyari government, an equal mix of humans and Cereans. Gavrisom filled them in on the ride into the capital, so Leia felt almost prepared when her escorts led her into the white-stone government tower at the center of the city.

Once they reached the floor with the prime minister's office, Gavrisom, Han, and the two Jedi stayed behind in the vestibule, leaving Leia to speak with Syne alone. Gavrisom confessed that he'd only spoken to the woman briefly and had not been able to make a firm judgment on her character. Leia was left with intuition and her half-developed Force powers; she hoped they would be enough.

When she stepped into the prime minister's office, the escorts did not follow. She found herself in a small circular chamber with white walls and a red carpeted floor. A quarter of the circle was a rounded window that looked out on Cephalia's stone-and-glass skyline as it gleamed in the midday sun. And, standing in front of that window with her back turned, was a human woman with long black hair pulled behind her neck, hands clasped at the small of her back. She didn't react to Leia's entrance, didn't say a word.

Leia cleared her throat and said, "You have a beautiful city, Prime Minister Syne."

The other woman turned around. She had dark narrow eyes in a round face. She looked about the same age as Leia, perhaps slightly younger.

Leia put on a diplomat's smile. Syne didn't return it, but she did walk around from behind her white desk and offer a hand. Syne's grip was hard, and so was Leia's.

"I'm glad we could finally meet in person," Leia withdrew her hand. "I want you to know that resolving the current crisis on Bavinyar is of the utmost concern to us."

"I know it is," said Syne. "I'm sorry you had to come here yourself, Madam President. Or is it Princess?"

"Leia is perfectly fine."

Syne still didn't smile. "I see. I've heard there was a motion in your senate to send peacekeepers here."

Leia noted the *your senate* with quiet disappointment. "The vote was delayed, pending further developments."

"I'm glad for that," Syne admitted. "No one on Bavinyar wants to see Republic troops in our streets. No one."

"The Bavinyari have a long history of independence and self-reliance," Leia complimented. "Humans and Cereans both."

"I know. It's part of the reason why both sides keep butting heads. Everyone is used to getting their way."

That was something that had already occurred to Leia as an outsider. She was encouraged that Syne had realized it too. "The Republic will do anything it can to help you stop this terrorist violence."

"Yes, your NRI agent has already been meeting with our BSA investigators," Syne added, a little darkly, "Although so far, they've only been investigating the BIL."

"I understand agents for the Cerean separatists claimed responsibility for the attack on the memorial service."

"Something the BIL has yet to do for Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination," Syne said, then added, "I am not a defender of either organization, Princess. I assure you of that. I know that the only way for Bavinyar to move forward is to have a unity government of both humans and Cereans."

"You share a vision with Pol-Had-Narr."

"Most Bavinyari do. I truly believe that. The issue is hardliners on both sides. With acts of violence they drive more and more citizens away from the center. Even people who'd never condone violence find themselves more affected by one tragedy or another, more under-standing of the BIL or CDF depending on their race."

Leia knew not to ask Syne if she had any sympathy with the BIL. Instead she said, "I understand that before you returned to Bavinyar, you were part of the NRDF."

"I was originally part of a group of Bavinyari exiles fighting with the Dorneans, yes, but eventually we joined the Republic."

"Do you have any experience, personally, with these kinds of conflicts?"

"You mean terrorism?" Syne scowled. "No. I was a crewman, and later a captain on a warship commanded by your General A'baht."

"I know. I've spoken to Etahn. He speaks highly of you."

Leia was rewarded with a tiny softening in Syne's hard face. "He was a good commander. I learned much about leadership from him."

"I'm curious. Had you ever seen Bavinyar before you resigned from the NRDF?"

Syne shook her head. "I grew up in Dornean space, half of the time on refugee ships."

"But you always yearned to come here."

Syne nodded. He eyes went distant. "I suppose you must understand some of this, Princess. The desire to return to a home you've lost."

"Very well," Leia said softly. "You actually got a chance to go home. I'm very envious."

Syne's gaze focused on hers. "I understand that you never knew your mother."

"No," Leia admitted. "To be honest, I'm still not sure who she was."

To her relief, Syne didn't seem keen to ask about her father. She said, "I never knew mine. The woman who raised me, and her husband... They were very protective. They wanted me *not* to follow my parents' path."

Leia thought of her brother, kept in ignorance on Tatooine. "They wanted to protect you. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I know." She gave a tiny sigh. "Still, the revelation was a shock. I'd heard about Jereveth Syne. Every Bavinyar refugee had. She was a martyr, an icon, and an ideal."

"I heard you changed your name when you found out."

"I was Jadesei Kaeori before that. Sometimes it seems like another person's name now."

"It's a heavy responsibility," Leia said, "Knowing what your parents accomplished."

Syne looked at her again. More softly than Leia's heard her speak before, she said, "I think we have something else in common, Princess."

"What's that?"

"My father," Syne said, "was a Jedi."

Leia's jaw dropped. She put a hand to cover it and whispered, "How did you know?"

"The same way I learned about my mother. They were both killed, I understand, shortly after the Clone Wars."

"Do you... know the name of this Jedi?"

Syne shook her head. "I never learned it. But when she told me... It made sense."

"In what way?"

"It explained things. How I tended to sense other beings' intentions without them having to say it. How sometimes I would dream of things before they occurred, though that happened more when I was younger. Tell me, Princess, do Jedi skills wane with age?"

"I'm not sure. I don't believe so." Leia blinked. "You said you learned about your mother and father at the same time. Then you changed your name and came to Bavinyar. That was... how long ago?"

"About twelve years."

"My brother had already established his Jedi Academy then. You must have heard of it."

Syne nodded.

"Did you ever consider following your father's path instead of your mother's?"

"No. Not for a moment."

Leia felt strangely disappointed. She'd followed her father Bail into politics long before she learned of her Jedi heritage, and while she'd never seriously considered changing life paths she'd often found herself wondering, longingly, what it would be like to train on Yavin 4 with her brother instead of shouldering the burdens of the New Republic. She still wondered if it would have been a better, more fulfilling life.

Syne sensed it, or saw it on Leia's face. She said, "Everything in my life has been about Bavinyar, since I was a child. The Jedi were just stories half-remembered, but I was raised by people who remembered Bavinyar, who told me about the white buildings of Cephalia and the deep blue of the sea." Her voice became grim, her expression fierce. "They told me what the Empire did to our world, how they ravaged it and expelled us. I knew we had to retake what was ours. I never doubted my place belonged here. Never."

That determination, that ferocity, also fueled all the human separatists in the BIL. Leia had dealt with countless fanatic soldiers, including those who served the Rebellion, but this felt different, coming from a woman with whom she had so much in common.

Syne sensed her discomfort and added, "Image in you had a chance to reclaim Alderaan. Just imagine. I think if you can... Well, I think you'll understand all you need to about Bavinyar."

Leia nodded, and felt a shiver down her spine. "I'll do that. I promise."

"Good," Syne's expression relaxed into a joyless smile. "That's all I ask."

When Leia Organa Solo left, she took her husband, her minister, and her two Jedi with her. Jadesei Syne waited until they'd left the building to summon Harbin Kaice to her office.

The general had spent time in a bacta tank after being wounded at the memorial service, and even now his right arm rested in a sling that looked incongruous against his pressed brown BDF uniform. A few thin white bandages marked the places where the tan skin of his face was held together by stitches.

"Thank you for calling me, Madam," Kaice said as he came in. "Is Organa Solo gone?"

Syne nodded and turned back to the broad view of Cephalia. "She's on her way to the consulate now."

"How was your conversation?"

Syne smirked but didn't look back at him. "You can be so transparent, General. You know she and I have certain... similarities, don't you?"

Kaice circled her desk. "I do. Does she know too?"

"She does now."

"Do you think this will help us?"

He hid his alarm well, but Syne could feel it emanating from him. For so long she's thought it was just an instinct she had, some special intuition.

"There people aren't our enemy, General."

Kaice blew breath out through his nose, betraying a little frustration. The general was a good fifteen standard years older than her, and he'd remembered Bavinyar from his childhood. He'd spent his life with a small group of exiles that had always been on the run. He'd never served with the New Republic military in any

capacity and because of all that he'd always been skeptical of Bavinyar's place in that vast confederation of worlds.

Syne had never been a Republican patriot either, but she'd spent enough time in its service to know that it was nothing like the old Empire, as the Bavinyar Independence League liked to claim.

"I don't doubt their ability to help, Madam," Kaice said at last, "But there are other factors here. We aren't just dealing with Organa Solo or Behn-Kihl-Nahm. We're dealing with a government that's about to have a critical election. That means *all* our problems are part of somebody else's political calculus. It's probably why Pohl-Had-Narr was assassinated when he was."

"I'm aware of that."

"That means *we* don't matter. When the Republic comes here or angsts over what to do with us back on Coruscant, it isn't *about* us. It's about Behn-Kihl-Nahm versus Borsk Fey'lya."

Syne sighed. Kaice was an upright, stoic, professional soldier in public, but in private he could be painfully blunt. It was why she'd made him her chief advisor, but it could still be frustrating.

"I don't disagree, General," Syne said at last. "But we're not going to turn down the Republic's help. Is that understood? If they can help us dismantle *both* the BIL and the CPF, then I'll take anything they want. Is that clear?"

Kaice nodded, formal again. "Very much so, Madam."

"Good." Syne looked out the window at that white city gleaming in the sun. It was so disarmingly serene. "I'm going to do everything I can to keep the peace on Bavinyar. For everyone."

Kaice nodded wordlessly, but she could sense his doubt. She would remand him for it, if only she could calm her own doubts. When her foster-mother had finally revealed the identity of her true mother, Jadesei Syne's first reaction had been shock, then denial, then a sense of crushing destiny.

She wondered if Leia Organa Solo felt like this, constantly pressured by the shadow of her dead.

The New Republic contingent was housed in a well-appointed and well-guarded villa in one of Cephalia's uphill districts. From its

main gathering room, one could easily see the land undulate downward toward the ocean and the capital's trademark mix of stone and glass buildings in all their splendor. It was an especially good panorama during the day, when you could make out blue water gleaming on the horizon, but even by evening it afforded a wonderful view of the skyline.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm wished he could have appreciated it. As it was, he felt as tense as everyone else in the room. Leia had brought a pair of Jedi with her, a human and a Bothan, one ex-NRDF and the other ex-diplomatic corps. Those three had come to join Behn-Kihl-Nahm, Gavrisom, and Pakpekkatt and discuss the current state of Bavinyar.

"I understand you had some time to talk to Prime Minister Syne today," Behn-Kihl-Nahm told her.

Leia nodded. "I did. It was an enlightening conversation."

Something about Leia's tone indicated she wasn't going to give away more than that. Instead she looked Pakpekkatt and asked, "What's the status of the investigation?"

"Which investigation?" the crest on the back of the Hortek's long neck rose. "I've been working with the BSA investigators looking into Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination."

"What about the attack at the memorial ceremony?" asked the human Jedi, Hamner.

"The local authorities were able to work together and respond quickly to that attack. The BSA was able to round up a number of the actors fleeing the scene, though some have escaped and gone to ground."

"Cerean separatists?"

Pakpekkatt nodded. "The ones apprehended seem to be low-ranking members of the CPF. The BSA has been conducting interrogations and raiding supposed CPF storehouses in Cephalia but found nothing of interest."

"For public attack, in broad daylight, they must have been expecting a crackdown," Leia said. "It's a wonder they went through with it at all."

"It shows how angry many are at Pohl-Had-Narr's death," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said gravely. "He'd be enraged himself, seeing how they use his name as an excuse for violence. The CPF hated Pohl-Had-Narr when he was alive. They called him a traitor to the cause for accepting Syne and his vice minister. Now he's a precious martyr."

"We can only hope that after this attack their network on Cephalia will be too scuttled to manage any more," said Gavrisom.

"Here, maybe," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. "But Bavinyar has many islands, and many places to hide people and supplies."

"Yes, supplies." Pakkpekatt hissed and took a datacard out of his pocket. He laid it on the table they'd gathered around and tapped it with a claw. "The CPF members that were apprehended all tried to ditch their weapons after fleeing the scene, but BSA was able to gather most of them afterward. The information on them is right here. It may be quite important."

He flicked the datacard across the table to Leia. She cupped it with her palm and asked, "What kind of information?"

"All of the weapons used in the attack were military-grade weapons. All were Imperial."

"Imperial?" Leia gasped.

"Indeed," the Hortek nodded. "That is an inventory of the weapons by type and serial number."

"Every Imperial weapon is marked with one," Hamner supplied, "Of course, there are millions of E-11 and T-21 blaster rifles throughout the galaxy. Many have been sold and re-sold on the black market. There's no reason to assume these came from the Bastion government."

"Someone might be trying to make us *think* they did," the Bothan Jedi Im'nel suggested.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm gave a deep sigh. "I've become very tired of outside forces meddling in our affairs for their own benefit."

"Perhaps smugglers simply found an abandoned garrison on a backwater planet," Gavrisom suggested. "We shouldn't assume anything from this."

"The fact that they were *all* Imperial worried me," Leia said. "I know the galaxy is full of Imperial hardware lying around, so I'm not going to hurry to place blame on Bastion or anyplace else. Still, it means there might be even worse weapons stashed away in another CPF storehouse somewhere."

"You got this all from BSA?" Im'nel asked. Pakkpekatt nodded. "Well, at least they're really willing to cooperate with us."

"They have been quite helpful so far," Pakkpekatt said. "Unfortunately, this does not mean we're any closer to success on the investigation we were originally sent here for."

"What's the issue there?" asked Hamner. "Have we been able to get a trace on the BIL?"

"There's no indication the BIL *is* responsible, though they're still the most likely culprit. They've gone to ground. All we know for certain is that some being or beings tunneled beneath the walls surrounding the prime minister's compound with a tripod-mounted surface-to-surface missile launcher."

Leia must have sensed some hesitation from the Hortek. She asked, "What else?"

Pakkpekatt blew out another hiss through his flaring nostrils. "The BSA has gathered forensic material from the site and come to some tentative suppositions, though they're nothing more than that. At the moment, they remain classified."

"What kind of suppositions?" asked Hamner.

Cautiously, Pakkpekatt said, "It seems possible, that the weapon was a New Republic device."

"The *Republic*?" Leia gaped.

"The placement of the tripod, chemical trace analyses, and examination of what appear to be shell fragments amidst the debris indicate that the weapon used might, I say *might*, have been a MerrSonn VT-35 launcher."

Hamner leaned forward. "The VT-35 is a very new model. And an advanced one. Lightweight, with soph-isticated tracking systems. I didn't think any had fallen into the second-hand market yet."

"Maybe it hasn't," Im'nel said softly.

"Meaning *what*?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm asked, not wanting the answer.

The Bothan held up both paws. "Who can say? But it needs investigation."

"If we could locate *other* BIL storehouses and see what other weapons they have, it would be very useful," said Hamner. "The same for the CPF."

"At the moment, we still don't know the BIL was responsible for Pohl-Had-Narr's death," Leia reminded everyone.

"Then who *else* did it?" asked Im'nel plainly. "The CPF might have wanted him dead too, but we already know they're using Imperial weapons."

"We're not certain a VT-35 really *was* used," Pakkpekatt reminded them, "All we know for certain is what's on the datacard I presented."

Leia looked down at the metal chip in her hand. "I think we have to take this to someone who can make use of its data."

"You mean the Empire?" Hamner said with faint disapproval.

"I mean Admiral Pellaeon. I trust him, Kenth. For something like this, I do. He wouldn't be trying to destabilize this election, not when it might jeopardize the peace treaty he put together."

"It could be one of the moffs, or some rogue officer."

"Exactly. If anyone can help us track these weapons, it's him. I know it's a long shot, but I think we have to do this."

Gavrisom made a whinnying noise and asked, "Would you like me to send the communication, Madam President?"

She shook her head. "Thanks for the offer, but no. I think I need to have this conversation with Pellaeon, one head-of-state to another."

"Are the comm lines secure here?" asked Im'nel.

"We brought some of our own equipment," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. "Its as secure as can be."

"Good. I'd hate to have to run back to the *Falcon* just to call Bastion." Leia slumped back in her chair. "I'll get to the bottom of this. As for the *first* investigation..." She paused; her face settled slowly into a deeper frown. "We'll wait and see where it leads."

"You don't want to begin an internal review?" Im'nel asked.

"Into what?" She shook her head. "We don't have enough information to start anything. We're going to have to wait for more information on that, or on the BIL."

"Very well," Gavrisom shrugged his wings and rustled his feathers. "We wait. It is good we've gained more time in the senate."

Leia smiled a very tight smile and said, "It's a good thing we've still got our secret weapon back home."

—CHAPTER SEVEN—

When Asyr Sei'lar arrived on Bavinyar and her transport disgorged its passengers into the warm sea-smelling air, she was very relieved to find herself amongst a mixed crowd. There were humans and Cerean aplenty, of course, but there were also a number of others from non-human races, including another Bothan, three Duros, a Falleen, a massive Herglic, and more.

Just from eavesdropping on conversations she gathered that most of them were journalists from various small-scale news-networks that couldn't afford to ship their people in company shuttles; she also overheard one well-groomed Cathar explain to his Togruta seat-mate that he was a lawyer hoping to make some good litigation out of all this mess; the Togruta, in turn, explained that she was selling insurance policies that covered cases of political violence, the market for which had just exploded on this generally ignored little planet.

So, all kinds were suddenly flocking to Bavinyar, which meant a black-furred Bothan would stick out just a little less.

That feeling of confidence dissipated the further away she got from the spaceport. The streets of Cephalia seemed an almost equal

mix of Cereans and humans, with other races easily standing out. As she watched the pedestrians' behavior, though, it seemed that the humans and Cereans watched each other more than they watched the obvious off-worlders. There was a concealed tension when they passed each other on the street; sideways looks lingered and people gave each other wide berths.

Asyr found herself reminded of the days after the capture of Coruscant, when the Krytos virus was plaguing non-human species and nobody was quite sure which new race it would spread to next. Humans stepped a little wider to stay clear of non-humans back then, even ones who'd previously spent their whole lives among aliens. It had been an awful time of casual paranoia and pervasive mistrust, in which the earnest affections of a young human pilot from Tatooine had been both Asyr's comfort and her escape. Gavin and the Krytos virus were a long time gone, but the fissure points on Bavinyar were just like they'd been twenty years ago.

By the time Asyr found her hotel, checked in, and deposited her things in her room, the sun was starting to set. Her room didn't have the best skyline view, but she lingered for a while to watch the gold smolder in the sky before heading back out. She had an appointment to keep.

She'd never been the Cephalia before, but the hotel had at least provided a datapad with a handy inter-active map that easily guided her to a place called Crescent Quay. True to its name, it was a curving stretch of coastline with a broad waterfront promenade. Spots of lamplights stretched out into the night and Asyr walked toward the north end of the curve, where she was unsurprised to find another Bothan standing in the darkness, leaning against a quay-side railing and looking out at the black ocean that stretched beyond.

She leaned against the railing right next to him and asked without greeting, "When did you arrive?"

"A day and a half ago," said Tresk Im'nel.

"Standard day or local?"

"It's not that much longer."

That was fair enough. Asyr glanced sidelong and took in the Bothan with a single glance. He didn't look much like a Force-user, dressed as he was in a casual set of trousers and a long-sleeved, loose shirt. She didn't see his lightsaber but she bet he had it hidden somewhere on him.

"I just got in a few hours ago," she told him, and looked back down the curving quay. Beings strolled casually along the waterfront in the darkness, and only when they dipped close to pools of lamplight could she differentiate between the cone-headed Cereans and short-headed humans. The tension she'd observed in the streets during the day seemed to have dissolved.

"Everyone feels more comfortable in the darkness," Tresk observed. Asyr could never tell when he was using his Jedi powers to sense her thoughts and when he was just being observant.

"It's a sad state when beings need anonymity to feel themselves," she said.

"Very true. I'm hoping we can do something about that."

"I hope so to. What have you found out?"

Tresk began explaining to her everything he'd learned since arriving on the planet. He divulged a number of interesting details still hidden from the public, namely the fact that the Cerean separatists were using Imperial-made weapons while the human ones seemed to have been supplied by the Republic.

It was an outrageous situation, but Asyr didn't question anything Tresk said. She'd known him even before he'd joined the Jedi Academy; shortly after she'd been assumed dead and left Rogue Squadron for a new life, Tresk had become disillusioned with his former employer and began searching for a new path of his own. Their mutual enmity for Borsk Fey'lya had drawn them both into the community of political dissenters in Drev'starn, though in time they'd branched into two very different paths. Despite the state of Jedi confidence and calm Tresk had fallen into since his training at Skywalker's academy, they both shared the same goal of reforming their homeworld and exposing its most powerful and dangerous political leader for what he was.

When Tresk had told her everything, Asyr shook her head and said, "Do you really think Fey'lya is behind it?"

"He's been posturing himself very effectively back on Coruscant," Tresk said, non-committal.

"I know. I follow the news-nets. But do you think it's possible?"

She was hoping, deep down, that he'd say *yes*, but instead Tresk merely shrugged. "It's too soon to say. What we *do* know is that he's intent on wringing every advantage he can out of this mess, so we need to stop it as soon as we can."

"If he becomes president it will be a disaster, for the Republic and for Bothawui."

"I agree completely."

Asyr looked at the dark water. Reflected light from the city at their backs winked on invisible waves. She asked, "What does your Jedi Master have to say about all this?"

"Master Skywalker's been trying very hard to keep the Jedi out of politics."

"It must be hard when your sister's in charge."

"It is. That's why he's being... overly cautious."

Asyr smirked in the dark. "In your opinion."

"In my opinion," Tresk allowed.

"I've heard you Jedi have this theory about how everything falls into one side or another, light or dark."

"That's... one way of saying it."

"I can't see much of a light side to political games."

Tresk was silent for a long time. Finally, thoughtfully, he said, "The Jedi were once servants of the Old Republic. They *were* political then, inherently."

"Weren't they also wiped out?"

"Exactly. Politics became an instrument of their destruction."

"You think Fey'lya is going to pull a Palpatine and wipe your kind out?" Asyr asked, surprised. Even for Fey'lya that sounded beyond the pale.

"No, not at all," Tresk shook his head. "What I mean to say is that politics are dangerous for Jedi. They drag us into all kinds of messy controversy. At the same time, if we completely ignore them,

then we're derelict in a major part of our responsibility to keep this galaxy safe."

"Is that your opinion or Skywalker's?"

"Mine, primarily. But still, it's a difficult issue."

Even before taking up the lightsaber, Tresk had always been a thoughtful one. Asyr had always been one for action. She said, "You'll do what you do, Tresk, and I'll do what I do. So tell me where I should start."

"I've talked to some of the BSA officers working on the investigation into Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination. I can put you in touch with them."

"I'd appreciate that."

Tresk took a tiny datacard from his breast pocket. It glinted briefly in reflect lamplight as he dropped in into Asyr's paw and disappeared.

"That also has my new comm freq," he said. "Are you still using the old one?"

"I am."

"Good. I'll let you know if anything else comes up."

"Just keep me informed, Tresk. The only way we'll get to the bottom of this is by working together." She stuffed the chip into a pocket and added with a smile, "I wasn't expecting to be working together. Your Master Skywalker was wise to send you to Bavinyar."

"Master Skywalker and his *sister*."

"Of course. I'm glad she's still in charge for this. I just wish she was staying on."

"If she were, I don't think we'd be in this mess in the first place. Instead we have to make sure Behn-Kihl-Nahm wins that elected. If we solve the problem on Bavinyar I think we'll do just that."

"And if Fey'lya ends up being the problem?"

Tresk's fur bristled and his snout scrunched up in a scowl. "Then we'll find out if Jedi really *can* play politics without going dark."

When Korr-Mad-Narr called Sham-Vi-Diin into his office for an update on the Pohl-Had-Narr investigation, the detective was

acutely aware of how stuck he was, and how bad that would look to his superior. As he rattled through his report, however, he noticed how distracted Korr-Mad-Narr looked, and how unaffected he seemed by the awkward halt the investigation seemed to have ground to.

When he was finished with his talk, Korr-Mad-Narr finally looked alert, like he'd come to the point he'd been waiting for all this time. The director asked, "What's your opinion of the Republic officials you've been dealing with?"

"You mean, how do I judge their character?"

"Do you think they would be honest if it turns out, as we suspect, that the weapons for the BIL came from a Republic source."

"Ah. That's... a difficult question. I only know these beings professionally, so it's hard to say. As far as it goes, they seem honorable."

"Honor is a slippery concept. Do you mean they seem loyal to the Republic, to their government?"

"I've never gotten a sense other than that they're trying to do their jobs the best they can."

"What about the Jedi? They're not military or intelligence professionals. They have a different set of priorities. Do they seem as... wedded to the powers on Coruscant as, say, Pakkep katt?"

"I'm not sure. The Bothan Jedi has been working more with Detective Ven, and the human, I understand, has a military background, so he's been in contact more with the BDF."

Korr-Mad-Narr looked pensively at his desk, so Sham-Vi-Diin asked, "Sir, I'm not entirely sure what you're asking."

"I already told you what I'm asking. I'm asking whether we can trust these beings- either the Jedi or the NRI agent- to place Bavinyar's interests above the stability of their government."

"Frankly, sir, the government's in an election, so I'm not sure how stable it is in the first place."

"Well, whatever happens, it's still more stable than ours," Korr-Mad-Narr snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. "The Jedi are interesting. As I understand it, their religion isn't officially associated with the New Republic government. They have no

official place in the military chain of command and no representation on Coruscant."

"Not officially, but their leader is the Chief of State's brother. She brought those two personally when she came from the Jedi Academy on Yavin 4."

"So you're saying their loyalty is to Princess Leia personally?"

Sham-Vi-Diin frowned. "I suppose that may be true. It's hard to say. I think that if the Princess did something really egregious they'd object."

"But they're more likely to side with her than with Fey'lya."

Sham-Vi-Diin thought on that Bothan Jedi who'd come along. From what little he'd worked with Tresk Im'nel, the Bothan didn't seem to be a Fey'lya loyalist; if anything, he seemed personally close with the Princess.

"I think," Sham-Vi-Diin said, "That you'd be right."

"I thought so." Korr-Mad-Narr nodded, as though satisfied. "That means they'll do what they can to prevent a Republic intervention on Bavinyar."

"I suppose you're right. I'd rather not have to find out for sure."

"Detective, our goal is to protect our sovereignty."

"We *are* part of the Republic, sir."

"I know, but we still have local autonomy. We chose our own leaders, run our own police and defense. Our fate is our own and it needs to stay that way. This isn't like the days under Empire, no matter what the human terrorists say. If what you're saying is true, the Jedi might be our best allies. They might be our best help to protect ourselves. That's something we have to keep in mind, going forward."

Korr-Mad-Narr went silent, as though he'd said all that needed to be. Sham-Vi-Diin looked down at him, uncertain as to what had just happened, but he felt that somehow it must have touched on something very important, something he would only be able to understand in time.

It had been nearly twenty years, nearly half her life, since Leonia Tavira had acquired the star destroyer *Invidious* as her personal

command ship. The act of possessing the mighty Imperial vessel had been a reason in itself, and more, *Invidious* had allowed her to create such a mighty pirate fleet that the New Republic had mustered its wartime navy to stop her.

Unfortunately, possessing a star destroyer had its share of inconveniences, which became only more apparent with time. It required a bigger crew than she could muster, and its many systems needed rigorous maintenance. After the Republic broke up her pirate group and left her with only one star destroyer, her crew had withered with her prestige, and at one point she'd raided a convoy of Cybot Galactica cargo ships for the sole purpose of stealing enough maintenance and technical droids to keep *Invidious* up and running. A small part of Tavira recognized that it might be more economic to simply abandon *Invidious* and relocate to a smaller ship; the rest of her was repulsed at the idea. *Invidious* was her home, her love, her hard-won prize. Over nearly twenty years the ship had become a part of her and she a part of it, and she'd do anything to keep it flying.

One inconvenience to *Invidious* she'd learned early on was that it was very, very difficult to refuel a mile-long star destroyer without attracting people's attention. Best Tavira knew, the only other such warship traveling space, unattached to any government, was Booster Terrik's *Errant Venture*, and Terrik, unlike Tavira, was a smuggler and a ruffian but not an outlaw still wanted by the New Republic. Terrik could refuel at many different space stations and all he'd get for his trouble was free advertising for his mobile casino and shadowport. Tavira had to follow a very different procedure to get her ship topped up.

Outlaws did for outlaws, so when *Invidious* needed refueling, Tavira always made her way to Hutt Space. Kwenn Station, located on the Coreward boundaries of their territory, was one of the only ports in the galaxy that had the ability and the willingness to perform refueling and repairs on an *Imperial*-class star destroyer, no questions asked, as long as you had the credits.

And, thanks to her recent deals with both sides of the current Bavinyar crisis, Tavira had just that.

While her ship was being serviced, Tavira went out onto the station. Nobody was going to *not* notice a black-painted *Imperial*-class star destroyer docked at Kwenn Station, so there was no point in being coy. Tavira brought along her towering Togorian guards, Grovlith and Argriss, plus a quartet of old Trade Federation battle droids from before the Clone Wars. As she walked down the station broad promenades, trailing her entourage, she drew satisfying looks from every being in her path. She knew what so many beings said about her: that she was old, down-and-out, a short-lived has-been pirate who now floated aimlessly in her broken-down old star destroyer hoping the Republic wouldn't catch her.

It was, as always, immensely satisfying to prove her naysayers wrong.

She had business to conduct as well. Once she felt certain she'd made her presence known, Tavira made her way to the section of Kwenn Station that had been set aside for use by the Besadii kadijic.

To her slight disappointment, the Nikto guards and Toydarian majordomo who led her inside the secure zone didn't bat an eye at her appearance; but then, she'd been here before. In almost two decades since leaving Imperial service, Tavira had made a number of close ties with the Hutts, the Besadii clan most of all. After the disaster of Lord Durga's Darksaber project, some had said the Besadii were doomed to irrelevance. Instead, under leadership of Durga's cousin Borgia, the Besadii had re-emerged as the most wealthy and powerful crime family on Nal Hutta, even edging out their longstanding rivals the Desilijic, who were now under the leadership of Pazda, uncle to the late and infamous Jabba.

Tavira and her escorts were led into a large domed chamber. A small ring of Gammorean guards, hefting heavy pikes and axes, stood around a repulsorbed on which a single Hutt lay. Tavira rarely spoke with Borgia herself when visiting Kwenn Station; more often than not she spoke with the Hutt before her, Golga Besadii Fir. Two human dancing girls, chained by the neck and wearing next to nothing, lay against Golga's bronze-colored bulk and looked up at Tavira with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

Golga said in his native tongue, "Welcome back to Kwenn Station, Admiral Tavira. It's been too long."

"I've missed every day I was apart from you, Bounteous Golga," she smirked in the same language. Golga was one of the few Hutts who could speak fluent Basic, though he preferred not to, and after this long, she was perfectly proficient in Huttese.

The creature rumbled laughter and petted the head of one of his slave girls like she was a pet tooka cat. "Have you met my newest additions, Admiral? These are Charise and Margla."

"Charmed," Tavira smirked down at the girls, who glared resentfully up at her. She wasn't averse to using her good looks to win favors from males- if anything she rather enjoyed it- but only when *she* was the one holding the leash. For these slave girls she felt a mix of condescension and pity.

"Are they fine dancers, Golga?"

"Excellent, my dear. The best I've ever had." Golga's fat tongue swiped across his lipless mouth. "You know, Admiral, I've always thought that *you* would make a fine dancer. You have the grace and the figure for it."

"I'm afraid I ended up on a different career path, but thank you for the compliment."

The Hutt rumbled laughter again. "So tell me, Admiral, why have you *really* come to see me?"

"To thank you for the fuel and repair work, of course."

"Your credits are thanks enough for that. What *else*?"

"Information that I think a canny business organiz-ation like yours will find useful."

Golga's tail-end twitched. "Go on."

"I imagine you'd like to know the results of the coming New Republic presidential election."

"The senate vote has been delayed because of the ongoing... crisis at Bavinyar."

"I know, but I'm sure you've been following the wage-makers. Tell me, what are the current odds?"

"Currently? Fifty-five percent on Behn-Kihl-Nahm."

"And he was the favorite by sixty-five before the last debate, wasn't he?"

"Are you telling me Borsk Fey'lya will win the election?"

Tavira smiled. "I'm here to guarantee it. I recommend your organization invest accordingly."

"Hmmm...." Golga rumbled, "And what of Dravvad? What of Pwoe?"

"Dravvad is a non-entity," Tavira waved a hand. "He only ran to raise his profile. As for Pwoe, he'll be dropping out soon and declaring his support for Fey'lya."

"And you're here to assure me of *that* also?"

"I'm actually here to ask your help in the matter."

Golga's eyes narrowed. "What help do you expect from the Besadii?"

"My arm isn't as long as it used to be. Yours is. I need a man on Coruscant killed."

Golga shook with laughter. "Is that so? And why should the Besadii act as your assassins?"

"Because it will prove that I can direct the outcome of this election."

"And who do you want killed? Not Pwoe."

"No, merely a human named Aston Blake."

"Should I know him?"

"No, you shouldn't. He's merely a sub-director in the quartermaster and provisions department for the Third Fleet, based at their administrative headquarters in Galactic City. He needs to die, and it needs to look like a suicide. I'm sure you have people on Coruscant capable of that."

Golga considered. "And if we do this for you?"

"Then Pwoe will end his candidacy shortly thereafter. I guarantee that."

"Hmmm... And when do you want this man killed?"

"In exactly two standard days would be timely. When Pwoe resigns, you'll know to take my advice seriously."

Golga rumbled thoughtfully once more. "I have to ask, Admiral. What's in this for you?"

"That's a broad question, Great Golga," she smirked. "Naturally, I've already placed substantial bets with every wage-maker I could."

"Naturally. What *else*?"

"The emotional satisfaction of seeing the Republic tear itself apart from the inside, and the knowledge that I had a key hand in its undoing."

"Hmmm. You do enjoy vengeance, don't you, dear?"

"Of course I do. Anyone who talks down vengeance hasn't done it right."

"Then remind me never to find myself on your bad side. But what *else*?"

"Isn't that enough?" she spread her arms.

"Perhaps it is, for you." Golga narrowed his eyes. "Very well. The Besadii will take care of this Aston Blake. If Pwoe bows out of the race and endorses Fey'lya in two days' time, I'll know you are telling the truth, and that you really do have the election in your hand."

"I'm glad we've reached an agreement."

"I don't suppose you'll tell me *how* you've managed all this?"

"Trade secret." She winked.

"Very well," Golga waved a small hand. "I will wait two days, then do as you asked."

"I'd start placing bets on it already," Tavira advised. "I already have."

"Hmmm.... Will you still be here on two days' time?"

"I'm afraid not. I have important strings to pull."

"Then I shall miss you, my dear, until we meet again."

"Until then, Illustrious Golga." Tavira executed a snap bow, smirked down at the two slave girls, then began her march back through Kwenn Station to *Invidious*.

On the walk back, she checked her comlink and found that Oskvarek had left a message telling her to come up to the bridge on her return. He said no more than that, but then, Oskvarek rarely said more than he needed to.

When she arrived on the bridge the Trandoshan was still hovering near the comm station. As she approach-ed he bore his fangs and growled, "There's been another attack on Bavinyar."

"The CPF?"

He shook his head. "No. It was the BIL. They attacked several small islands with Cerean settlements."

"Attacked? Attacked *how*?"

"Reports are still coming in. It's not clear, but it sounds like they were using our hardware."

"What were the targets? BSA offices?"

"It looks like bombings in public places. A few local government buildings, plus marketplaces and transit hubs"

"Pure terrorism then." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. More fuel to this fire was a good thing, in theory, but if the New Republic cracked down on the BIL fast, she might have to move her timetable forward.

She stalked over to the comm station and input her personal encryption code. Then she punched in the frequency for Pedric Cuf.

She tapped her fingers impatiently on the console surface as she waited. During their last meeting Pedric had assured her that he'd give her extra forewarning of any BIL attacks to come. That warning had never come, and now she stood to be embarrassed with the Hutts because of it. It was decidedly not a favorable turn in what had heretofore been a promising partner-ship.

She had to wait for almost two full minutes, long enough to doubt he'd answer, when Cuf's blue holo-image finally sprung up in front of her. The human blinked, like he was surprised to see her, and said, "I'm sorry for the delay. Things are busy here, as you can imagine."

"I thought we had an agreement, Pedric." She gave her best girlish pout; best not to come off too angry from the start. "You were supposed to give me fair warning before this happened."

"I know. These new attacks went without my knowledge."

"Is that normal, Pedric? I thought you were Kolin's most trusted man?"

"I *am*. This was different. These attackers weren't acting on his authority either."

"A rogue group then? Dissension among the ranks?"

"It appears so. Some young members were very incensed by the attack during the memorial service and retaliated of their own volition."

"Did they use our weapons?"

"They were some of the groups that received them, yes."

"If the Republic is going to trace these weapons back to me, I want to know. I *need* a warning. If I don't, they'll get me, and that means they'll get you as well."

"I'm quite aware," Pedric said through his teeth. "Rest assured, I'm doing everything I can right now so the Republic does *not* find out about our arrangement."

He was clearly stressed and angry, and she felt a twinge of sympathy despite herself. "It sounds like you have a mess to clean up."

"I certainly do. I'd like to get to it."

"Very well, then. But I need to know, Pedric. Even if you *don't* hear anything, I want a call from you the next standard day. If I don't get it, I'll have to assume you've been taken by the authorities."

He looked reluctant, but nodded. "Very well. I'll update you tomorrow. Goodbye, Leonia."

The holo shrunk to nothing. Tavira glanced over her shoulder, where Oskvarek was hovering.

"How long until we're ready to go?" she asked the Trandoshan.

"Another twelve hours at least."

"Then I'll be in my quarters until then. But be ready to depart as soon as possible."

"Yes, Admiral."

Tavira spun on her heels and marched off the bridge. Her strides were long, fast, tense. She knew that even when she got to her quarters she wouldn't be able to rest. The stakes suddenly felt much higher.

—CHAPTER EIGHT—

Despite the chaos of the last six hours, Jadesei Syne took some consolation in the sight before her. The briefing room in the prime minister's tower was bustling with a diversity of staff: human and Cereans, plus a furry Bothan, a feathered Calibop, and an armor-plated Hortek for good measure. All of them- human and alien, Republican and Bavinyari- all moved for a singular reason.

It was that purpose she needed consolation for. The sudden attacks on the islands of Maressa, Lemurya, and Shaldonia had throw the entire planet into an uproar. Amazingly, no more riots had broken out on the streets of Cephalia; Syne wanted to think it was because she had acted quickly and declared martial law on all three islands that had been subject to terrorist attacks by the BIL. Even now, mixed groups of BSA policemen and BDF ground troops were putting all three islands under lockdown and searching both them and adjacent locations for the perpetrators of the attacks.

She only hoped that here, at last, the BIL had overplayed its hand. If its leaders could be found and arrested after this, it would go a long way to defusing the competitive violence between human and Cerean separatists.

She hoped, anyway.

The situation room was abuzz with constant low chatter, occasionally broken by important announcements. As Syne was mentally clutching her private hope, a BSA agent entered the room and triumphantly announced that a BIL storehouse on Shaldonia had been seized. A dozen cell members had been captured as well as a good stock of supplies.

Syne sidled next to Organa Solo and told the other woman in a low voice, "This is good news. Perhaps now we can figure out who has been supplying the BIL."

Organa Solo nodded gravely. The BSA's suspicion that a Republic-made missile launcher had been used to kill Pohl-Had-Narr was not widely known, but it had been made clear to the both of them.

A wordless sensation passed between the two women, and Syne realized that Organa Solo had been trying to touch her through the Force. It was an uncomfortable feeling, being touched like that; she was uncertain what it meant.

Syne lowered her voice further and asked, "Do you want something from me?"

To her surprise, a slight smile creased Organa Solo's tired face. "I was trying to give you a suggestion."

"Apparently I'm not properly attuned to receive it."

"Or I'm not attuned to send it. Neither of us is a Jedi." Organa Solo sighed a little and said, "Can we talk privately?"

"Of course," Syne nodded, and gestured to the president to follow.

It took less than a minute for them to retreat to a private room and lock the door. Syne squared her shoulders to face the other woman. "Well, what is it? Is it something about the BIL?"

"I'm sorry, no. It's about the *other* half of this problem."

"You mean the CPF."

"Yes. You know that the weapons they used during the attack on you were Imperial."

"I knew that the moment I heard the blasters go off."

"Your investigators found serial numbers on some of the weapons. They shared it with NRI and NRI shared it with me."

"And did *you* share it with someone?" Syne narrowed her eyes.

Leia nodded. "I did. I sent that information to the Imperial Remnant."

"The *Empire*?" Syne snarled. "You trust them?"

"I've developed a good working relationship with Admiral Pellaeon," Organa Solo said calmly. Syne could only stare in disbelief; for what the Empire had done to her family, to Bavinyar, she'd never allowed herself to forgive them, not even when the once-great Empire had shriveled to the pathetic rump state it was now.

Yet apparently this other woman, who had even more cause to hate the Empire than she, had somehow done so. Syne couldn't decide whether she was impressed or appalled.

Organa Solo pressed on, "Admiral Pellaeon was very cooperative. He doesn't want to do anything to endanger the peace treaty the two of us put together."

"Those weapons could be decades old, and the Empire was broken into pieces since then. Could Pellaeon *really* help you?"

"I admit I was skeptical too, but I felt I had to at least make the effort." Organa Solo allowed a little smile. "It was worth it. It turns out those weapons *were* in the Remnant's registry, even after all this time. They all came from the same production batch."

"When were they made?"

"Over thirty years ago."

Syne snorted. "That tells us nothing."

"It tells us a lot, actually. Those weapons were shipped fresh from the factory to the Black Fifteen facility."

"That name is.... Familiar." She felt vaguely embarrassed at being unable to place it.

"Black Fifteen was the Empire's facility over N'zoth," Organa Solo said.

"The Yevetha?"

"Exactly. These weapons belonged to the Black Fleet that the Yevetha captured after the Battle of Endor and used to terrorize the Koornacht cluster seven years ago."

Syne remembered it now. "The Imperial crews recaptured their ships, didn't they?"

"They did, then jumped to the Deep Core. Admiral Pellaeon explained that some ships found their way to *his* Imperial holdings in the Outer Rim after they discovered that Byss was already destroyed."

"What does all this mean?"

"The rifles we have here were supposedly shipped to the Black Fleet's flagship, the super star destroyer *Intimidator*. *Intimidator* never made its way to Pellaeon's fleet."

"I remember," Syne nodded. "It was found drifting in space abandoned a few years ago."

"Our forensics people never figured out what happened to *Intimidator*," Organa Solo said, "Though it seems to have taken heavy damage using weapons we were unable to identify, then abandoned. However, our inspectors also believe that the hull had been scavenged after it was destroyed, but before our people got a look at it."

"Then that gets us nothing. Space is full of scavengers. There's no way to tell who could have raided *Intimidator* before your people did." She paused. "Is there?"

"I've ordered teams to re-open their review of *Intimidator*'s remains."

"What happened to the hull? Is it still intact?"

Organa Solo shook her head. "It was dismantled for scrap last year, but our forensics teams took very thorough records. We also tried to salvage any computers we could find aboard."

"If you haven't found out who scavenged the ship before, why would you do it now?"

"To be honest, Prime Minister, it wasn't a priority before."

"A super star destroyer gets demolished by an unknown party and you didn't make it a priority to find out?"

Organa Solo allowed another sigh. "It was peacetime. There seemed to be no immediate threat. Out teams believed- and I concurred- that whoever wrecked *Intimidator* would have come from the Unknown Regions. We've made... some small inroads into that space recently. I thought I had an idea of who was responsible. Now I'm having second thoughts."

"And you can't just *ask* the people you thought did it?"

Organa Solo shook her head. Clearly there were some things that were classified that she wasn't willing to share. That annoyed Syne, but at the same time she felt small relief that Organa Solo had, at least, trusted her enough to give her this information. She wasn't sure what she was going to *do* with it, but the gesture felt important.

"I appreciate what you told me, Princess, I really do," Syne said, and hoped her honesty came through in the Force. "However, at the moment, whoever's arming the CPF isn't our top priority. The BIL is."

She could feel the cautious goodwill between them evaporate. To her credit, Organa Solo did not act like one accused. She said, "Now that we've recovered from BIL personnel and equipment, I think a lot of things will be laid clear."

"I hope so."

"And I want you to know that whatever the truth is, people will be held accountable for what they've done, no matter who they are."

In other words, she acknowledged that someone inside the Republic might be playing a game, and that they'd be punished if found out. "I'll hold you to that, Princess."

"Good. Can you say the same?"

It was a perfectly valid question; all this time Syne knew that somewhere in her government- in the civilian structure or the BDF- there were bound to be people who were giving aid to the BIL in small or large ways. It was a reality she acknowledged to herself, but it was the kind of reality not suited for public pronouncement. Organa Solo's question felt like an accusation.

Syne knew it was unfair to feel hurt. She said, as firmly as Organa Solo had, "People will be held accountable, no matter who they are."

"I'm glad we understand each other," Organa Solo said, and Syne felt a tendril of the Force touch her; it seemed to say, *I truly am glad*.

Syne had spent her life observing other beings' inner emotions without even trying; now that someone was getting a touch of her hidden self she felt awkward. She knew it was hypocritical, but she still didn't like it.

Still, she told Organa Solo, "We should get back to the situation room. Reports from Shaldonia should be coming in soon."

"Yes. I think it's something we'd all like to see." Organa Solo turned and walked out of the room; Syne hesitated for the tiniest moment, then fell in quickly behind her.

When evening fell, Asyr Sei'lar met with Tresk Im'nel again. This time he commended her and surprised her by saying he'd come to her hotel.

When he came knocking she ushered him inside. "Are you sure it's all right for you to come like this?"

"I stayed well clear of the trouble spots, and I wasn't followed," Tresk said, throwing off his cloak. "You don't have to worry about the hotel staff either."

Asyr frowned. "Did your Jedi powers help you with that?"

"I only nudged their minds so they didn't pay attention to me as I came in. I used the same thing to slip through the streets. I didn't scrub their memory or anything," Tresk sounded almost defensive, like she'd accused him of using the dark side, though Asyr didn't particularly care on way or the other.

"What about the other Republic staff? What about Princess Leia, or the other Jedi who came with you? Won't *they* notice you're gone?"

"Hamner is asleep after a very long day. And Princess Leia knows I'm out."

Asyr's fur bristled. "Are you saying she knows about *me*?"

"Not at all. She is, however, aware of the potential of, shall we say, outside forces meddling with this crisis on Bavinyar. One of my goals in coming here is to investigate that meddling as I see fit."

"Does she suspect Fey'lya is supplying the BIL?"

"She acknowledges the possibility."

Asyr felt slightly encouraged by that. "All right then. Why specifically did you come across town to meet me tonight? I'm sure you've had a tiring day."

"That's fair to say." With a tired sigh, Tresk sat himself down on her bed and pulled a new data-chip from his pocket. He tossed it onto the blanket. "That's the inventory of the supplies found in the BIL storehouse that was used to carry out the terrorist attacks on Shaldonia."

Asyr scooped up the disc, then went across the room for her datapad. As she plugged the card in she asked, "What about the attacks on Maressa and Lemurya?"

"Potential culprits have been apprehended and a few locations have been raised by the BSA, but nothing incriminating was found. My guess is that those cells moved their equipment to a new location before carrying out the attacks."

"The Shaldonia cell messed up then."

"Lucky for us. The BSA team found some very interesting items there."

Asyr breathed deeply as the list appeared on her datapad. The storehouse must have been large and the BSA investigators thorough, because it was a very long list. She scrolled down it, waiting for something to catch her eye, until it finally did: a catalog of weapons, mainly BlasTech and MerrSonn, all of recent manufacture.

"Those weren't marked with serial numbers like the Imperial weapons the CPF was using," Tresk said, "Which makes me think they never went into actual service with the NRDF."

"We need to check whether these models sold to private militias too."

"NRI already checked that. The BlasTech T-25b rifles and the MerrSonn XV-7 grenades *are* being sold to private buyers but the MerrSonn TV-11 is a brand new design made in cooperation with New Republic engineers. It hasn't been sold on private market at all.

Which means that it was either stolen from a MerrSonn production warehouse-

"Or it was pilfered from the NRDE," Asyr said. "Given that it's mixed in with *other* weapons of different make, I'd say that's near-certain."

"I would too."

Asyr sat on the bed next to Tresk. "All right then. We know *someone* in the Republic has been feeding weapons to the BIL. This is proof, right here."

"It's not proof until we know *who* is doing this. And, hopefully, who put them up to it."

And Tresk had come here so Asyr could help him get proof. She was already getting ideas, but she asked, "What about NRI? Aren't they looking into it too?"

"They are, but I think they're also suddenly busy examining into all the records they took from the super star destroyer *Intimidator* two years ago."

Asyr's ears flattened. "What are you talking about?"

"We've been led to believe that the CPF is being supplied with Imperial blaster rifles taken from the wreckage of the super star destroyer from the Black Sword Fleet that was found abandoned in the Unknown Regions."

"I heard about that. Why do they think its weapons are in in CPF hands now?"

Tresk shook his head; apparently there were some secrets he wasn't willing to share with her. "The point is, NRI is looking into both issues right now. Princess Leia and I both feel that if, and I say *if*, someone in the New Republic hierarchy *has* been supplying the BIL with weapons, we need to investigate very discreetly."

"I understand completely," Asyr nodded. "And I think I already have an idea where to start."

"I thought you might," Tresk smirked. "Do you need any more help from me right now?"

"Not at the moment."

"Good. Then I should be going. As you said, we've all had a long day."

"What about the riots?"

"Contained, mostly. I didn't run into any of them on the way here. And if I *do* run into trouble, well, I have advantages the rioters don't." He rose from the bed but didn't start from the door. She looked up at him, wordlessly, asking with her eyes if he really had to go.

"It's been a long day," he said again, and pulled his cloak back on. "I'll be in touch, Asyr."

"Stay safe, Tresk," she told him as he left. Once the door closed she tried to listen for his footsteps as he retreated down the hall, but even her sharp Bothan hearing didn't pick up anything. The entire room was deathly silent.

She looked down at the datapad in her lap, read it through one more time, then got up. She had a call to make.

It was two hours before dawn in CoroNet city when Iella realized, very gradually and reluctantly, that the comlink resting atop her bedstand was buzzing with an incoming call. At first, she didn't react besides burying her face a little deeper into her pillow, and she only picked her head up and surrendered herself to the reality of the call when her husband muttered, "Is that you or me?"

She sighed and pushed herself upright. She fumbled for the comlink, pressed the *receive* button, and mumbled, "Who's't?"

She got no response, the comlink kept buzzing. That was when she remembered that she'd set her link up to serve as a router to the apartment's main comm system just in case a call came in from one very specific source. The comlink kept rattling against her palm, reminding her that Asyr was waiting for a response.

She threw back the sheets and stumbled out of bed. She heard Wedge say, "What is it?" but didn't look back.

The door slid shut behind her. She went across the living room to the comm console and sat down in front of it. She turned it on, expecting a blue holo-image to spring up and light the dark room.

Nothing came; the only glow was a small green light on the console, confirming that a connection had been made.

Iella leaned in close to the console's speaker grille and whispered, "Asyr, are you there?"

"Can you talk, Iella?"

"Sure. It's 0400 here. Everyone else is asleep."

"I didn't realize. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I'm sure it's important."

"It is. Have you heard anything about what's been going on at Bavinyar?"

"Only what the news-nets have been saying."

"Nothing from your old intel co-workers?"

"To be honest, Asyr, I've been trying to enjoy my retirement."

"Of course." There was a pause; then she resumed, "Arrests have been made since the attacks. BIL supplies and personnel have been taken into BSA custody. We've also examined CPF materials retrieved after the failed attempt on Syne's life."

Iella closed her eyes and sighed. The intrigue, the violence, the confusing stew of acronyms for a confusing stew of factions; those were all the things she'd been overjoyed to get away from.

"Have you found anything you were looking for?" she asked tiredly. They both knew she meant links to Fey'lya.

"Maybe. That's why I'm calling you. NRI already has investigation teams working but my contacts and I thought it would be good to take a subtle approach."

"Meaning what?"

"We believe the BIL has been receiving supplies pilfered from NRDF, specifically supplies that were sent from the manufacturer but *not* listed as received by the quartermaster corps."

"You mean someone on the inside is passing those supplies onto Bavinyar."

"Exactly. We're going to need someone in the quartermaster corps who can perform an audit and see where these supplies might have slipped away."

"Do you have a list for me?"

"I'm sending it as a package attached to this data-stream. This is only from a single BIL safehouse, so it's a good bet the total amount of stolen material is magnitudes bigger."

"What kind of supplies are we talking about?"

"Top-of-the-line, expensive military-grade weapons, like the kinds used to assassinate Pohl-Had-Narr and kill dozens in the recent attacks. You'll see. They've got enough for a serious military operation."

"All right." Iella's mouth felt dry. She hated, *hated* being thrown back into this mess but she knew she couldn't refuse, not when the stakes were so high, not when Asyr was relying on her.

"How well do you know Feylis Ardele?" the Bothan asked.

That took Iella by surprise. Then she realized it shouldn't have; Feylis was one of her husband's ex-pilots, now a senior officer in the quartermaster corps. She'd be perfect to look into this.

"I know her a little," Iella admitted. "I didn't even meet Wedge until after she'd left the Rouges, so I've only met her a few times at squad reunion gatherings."

"But she'll help you if you ask for it, won't she?"

"For something like this, I don't know if she'll have a choice."

"Good. Please work with her on this, Iella. This could be the key to solving the Bavinyar crisis."

Iella could hear the enthusiasm in her voice and was wary. "Asyr, there's no knowing for certain who helped steal these weapons. The BIL could have just bribed a regional shipping manager. It could be a lone sympathizer. We have no idea."

"I know it could be a lot of things, but it's still our best lead and we have to follow it."

"I know, and I will. Is there anything else, Asyr?"

"Nothing right now. Thank you so much, Iella, and I'm sorry for calling at a bad time."

"It's all right. I'll handle it from here." She reached for the switch to terminate the call, then added, "Stay safe, Asyr."

"Don't worry about me," the Bothan said, and the green light on the console winked off. Connection severed.

Iella checked to see that an attachment had been contained in the data-stream. She transferred it to a small card that she stuffed into the pocket of her pajamas, then walked quietly back to her bedroom.

She lay down in the bed as carefully as she could. She'd thought Wedge was asleep, but once she lay down and rested her head on a pillow she heard him mutter, "Who was that?"

Her heart quickened. Her mind raced for an answer. All she could come up with was, "Someone called by mistake."

She knew it was a bad answer but he didn't call her on it. He didn't say anything at all. She lay on her side, facing away from him, and waited a good five minutes before she realized he must have fallen asleep again.

She remembered that Coronet's local time was a few hours ahead of that in Galactic City, which meant she might have to wait until nearly noon in the coming day to place a call to Feylis Ardele in the quartermaster's office.

Somehow she didn't think she'd get much sleep before then. So instead she lay in the dark, wondering what she'd tell Wedge in the morning, assuming he remembered any of this at all.

The BIL members captured at Shaldonia had been flown all the way to the BSA prison located on a solitary island five kilometers north of Cephalia. The complex was the largest of its kind on the planet, and the most secure.

Even though his purview was technically Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination, Sham-Vi-Diin had put in a request to visit the facility and speak with some of the prisoners. His request had been granted immediately; as he'd discovered over the past week, his new assignment had priority over pretty much everything, and all he had to do was ask. For a long-time city homicide investigator, it was a strange place to be in. He wondered how long it would take him to get used to having authority.

Sham-Vi-Diin was escorted to the prison cells by Yan-Kord-Nimmon, the chief BSA officer on Shaldonia who'd personally led the capture of the prisoners. As they walked down seemingly-endless identical white-brick hallways, Yan-Kord-Nimmon told him, "We found them when they were preparing to scatter, but they'd been slow in getting their gear packed."

"It sounds like the other cells moved safehouses before launching the attacks," said Sham-Vi-Diin.

"This cell was sloppy. From what it sounds like, the cell based on Maressa was the one to instigate the attacks. This one heard about them last-minute and scrambled to follow suite."

"So you're saying it wasn't ordered by Kolin?"

"It sounds like this was a spontaneous action taken by a handful of cells, in response to the assassination attempt on Syne."

Sham-Vi-Diin shook his head. No one had been killed in the riots in Cephalia last night, but he knew that was just the start. Next the CPF would escalate with a retaliatory strike of their own.

"How compliant have they been?" Sham-Vi-Diin asked as they stepped through the durasteel gates that marked off the highest security cells.

"Compliant enough. These aren't exactly the best of the best as far as the BIL was concerned. Of course, if they were, we'd have never captured them in the first place."

"They were fanatic enough to kill eighteen people on Shaldonia."

"In a sloppy attack, yes. Most of them are young and hotheaded, so we broke a few of them quickly enough. But since they're at the bottom of the rank ladder they didn't know much."

"Did we capture their leader?"

"His name is Nika Mardham. Would you like to speak with him first?"

"Do you think he'll talk to me?"

"He hasn't talked yet, not that we haven't tried to get stuff from him. You're welcome to your turn, Detective."

"Thank you. Can you move him to a place where we can speak safely alone?"

"His cell will be fine," Yan-Kord-Nimmon stopped abruptly in front of a blank metal door. He punched some keycode into the control panel on the wall; then the door slid open.

Sham-Vi-Diin stepped inside. He froze and stared. From his shoulder, over the threshold, Yan-Kord-Nimmon asked, "Will you need anything else?"

The detective shook his head dumbly. The other Cerean said, "Very well. Good luck."

The door slid shut. Sham-Vi-Diin braced one hand against the wall. He'd seen more than his share of dead bodies, often ones killed violently, but he was still shocked by the shape of the human crouched on the cold permacrete floor, bound to the wall by manacles clamped tight on his wrists and ankles. His clothes had been torn off, and it was clear that his captors had beaten every inch of his body with fists and boots. He was curled up in a fetal position; dried blood still caked his lips and lower jaw and his half-lidded eyes stared blankly ahead at Sham-Vi-Diin's boots.

The detective crouched low and waved a hand close to the prisoner's face. He asked, "Can you hear me? Nika Mardham, can you hear me?"

The eyes blinked into focus. The jaw worked open like a rusty hinge, open and closed, open and closed, before Mardham finally croaked, "Who are you?"

"My name is Detective Sham-Vi-Diin."

Mardham grunted and closed his eyes. He was shivering in the cool prison air. Sham-Vi-Diin took his jacket off and draped it over the naked man's hunched-up body.

"I'm sorry for the way they treated you," Sham-Vi-Diin said.

Mardham grunted and muttered, "Kriffing cone-heads... Should go back to your own world... Next time..."

"Next time what?"

Mardham's eyes opened, suddenly angry, and met his. "Next time we'll do *all* of you."

The churning in his stomach settled, and his empathy from a moment ago withered without totally dying. In pity, he'd allowed himself to forget what kind of man this was, beaten half to death and chained to a cold wall.

"I understand you were the leader of the BIL cell on Shaldonia," he said as calmly as he could. "Was it your decision to execute the attack or did it come from higher up?"

"What does it matter?"

"Did your leader, Aviran Kolin, authorize the attacks?"

Mardham breathed out and said nothing. Awkwardly, he shifted beneath the jacket laid over him so that he could sit upright. "Kolin had nothing to do with it."

"Did Kolin tell you *not* to attack?"

"He had nothing to do with it," Mardham repeated. "Nothing. We did this on our own. To get back. This is our world. You damn coneheads, you stole it. You and your Imp buddies."

"No one on this planet is a friend of the Empire."

"You could sure fool me, what with all the Imp guns your conehead buddies have. Now you bastards brought Coruscant down on us. You'll get them to crush us like they did before..." He shivered and pulled the jacket tighter over his body. "But you won't stomp us out. True Bavinyari never die."

"We didn't bring Coruscant down on you," Sham-Vi-Diin said firmly. "You brought them on yourselves when you killed Pohl-Had-Narr."

Mardham's face screwed up. "That wasn't us."

"I'm sure your group wasn't involved in it, no. But one of your cells was."

Mardham wagged his head. "It wasn't us. I talked to Kolin after it went down, see? I was in on that conference."

"What conference? Where was it?"

Mardham snickered. "I ain't telling you that, conehead. Everybody left that island when it was done anyway. I'm just saying that Kolin was shocked as anybody else when Pohl-Had-Narr died. I mean, why would he do that? What's in it for him? And why do it during the *election*? It just brings Coruscant down on our heads, to stomp us out."

"You have a human in the Prime Minister's office now."

"Syne?" he snorted. "She ain't one of us. Her mother, she was a hero. That lady? She's all up on compromise and coexistence and all that crap. That's what happens when she grew up with aliens. Messed up her mind."

"And I take it you didn't?" Sham-Vi-Diin said dryly.

"No, sir. Born and raised on Wallis XI. All humans, everyone alike. Best way to run things. The Imps had that right at least. But

the point is, detective, Kolin didn't kill Pohl-Had-Narr. None of us did."

"Then who did? The CPF?"

"Maybe. It would make sense; they never liked Pohl-Had-Narr either. Oh, don't act all surprised. I know who you are, conehead. I've seen you on the news-nets. You're the one who's supposed to find out who killed Pohl-Had-Narr. If you're surprised by this I guess that means you ain't doing too good a job."

The words cut deeper than Sham-Vi-Diin wanted to admit. He'd never straight-out taken it for granted that the BIL had been behind the attacks, but he'd never ruled them out as the most likely suspects either. The fact that they'd never found any further evidence had always nagged at him, but if what Mardham said was true, then he was more lost than ever.

"I've got another question for you," he said. "Some-thing very different."

Mardham shrugged and looked at the wall.

"As cell leader you seem to know something about Kolin's operations. So tell me, where did you get those weapons? They seem to be high-quality Republic-made models."

Mardham tugged the throat of the jacket tighter around his neck. "Do I get to keep it?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your coat. Can I keep it? It's cold here."

"I won't take it from you."

Mardham nodded, satisfied. "I don't know where we got them."

Sham-Vi-Diin frowned. "You just-"

"I didn't promise nothing. And I don't know. We get them shipped in from offworld. Maybe Kolin has somebody in the Republic who steals stuff for him, I don't know."

"Do you know how they're delivered to Bavinyar? Is it on an NRDF spacecraft?"

Mardham shook his head. "It's not. Someone else brings them, a smuggler."

"What's his name? What kind of ship does he have?"

"I never seen his ship, so I don't know. But he calls himself Pedric Cuf."

"Pedric Cuf," Sham-Vi-Diin repeated.

"That's right. I met him once. Human. Pale face, dark hair, a little older than me. I don't know who he works for. Maybe the Hutts. Maybe he's just a freelancer. Anyway, he gets the goods and ships them to Kolin."

"Is there any chance Pedric Cuf is on Bavinyar now?"

Mardham shrugged. "I don't think so. He comes, he goes. He ain't BIL, just a gun-runner."

"When was his last delivery?"

"I don't know. Maybe two weeks before Pohl-Had-Narr died. And don't ask me what he brought. All I know is the stuff our cell got. Wherever he is now, I bet he's staying far away from Bavinyar. Slick and smart, he was. Not dumb enough to come back here now that everything's hit the fan."

It was more information than Sham-Vi-Diin had been expecting. He wondered what else he might ask of this man; nothing came.

Instead he rose to his feet and said, "You can keep the jacket. I'll get a new one."

Mardham nodded and stayed where he was, huddled on the floor.

Sham-Vi-Diin spent the rest of the afternoon talking to the other prisoners. Some spouted racist curses at him, others refused to talk, and a few repeated fragments of what he'd already gotten from Mardham. All of them had been badly beaten by their captors. Given what they'd done and what they stood for, Sham-Vi-Diin couldn't blame the BSA agents who'd seized them for being angry. Still, such casual brutality reflected badly on their organization, and he brought it up that evening when he met with Korr-Mad-Narr to summarize his day.

The BSA director, though, just shrugged behind his desk and said, "You can't blame people for being angry. And we didn't lose any of the prisoners, did we?"

"No, sir."

"Then I don't think it's a critical issue." Korr-Mad-Narr put down the datapad with Sham-Vi-Diin's report and folded his hands on the desktop. "Frankly, I wouldn't give much credence to anything these men said."

"I was alarmed when he said the BIL didn't kill Pohl-Had-Narr. And skeptical."

"As well you should be. They're still your prime suspects, aren't they?"

"They are, sir. At least, they were the obvious ones from the start..." He trailed off.

Korr-Mad-Narr frowned. "What is it, Chief?"

"The men I talked to suggested that killing the prime minister would actually help the CPF more than the BIL."

The director snorted. "Of course he'd say that."

"I know. But it does stand to reason, from a certain point of view. After the latest attacks, they'll be more emboldened than ever."

"They were trying to confuse you, Detective. Don't let them win."

"I'm not, sir. I'm just voicing my concerns. The fact is, we've spent the past week investigating Pohl-Had-Narr's death and haven't gotten anywhere."

"Haven't we? The BIL supplies we seized include high-quality Republic-made weapons, just like what it's theorized was used to kill Pohl-Had-Narr. That indicates a connection."

"It does, but it's not proof."

Korr-Mad-Narr raised an eyebrow. "Should I put someone else in charge of this investigation, Detective?"

"Absolutely not," Sham-Vi-Diin wagged his head back and forth. "I promise you, sir, I am still up to the task and I will absolutely continue to carry out this investigation, no matter where it leads."

"See that you do," the director said firmly. "I have a feeling we'll be getting more breakthrough over the coming days. We all have to be ready to act on them, and if we act fast, I believe we can end this crisis before it gets any more violent."

Sham-Vi-Diin nodded. He hoped, prayed Korr-Mad-Narr was right, but he couldn't find it in his heart to believe.

When Avan Beruss returned from the senate offices at 2200 hours, all he wanted to do was sit down, have a stiff drink, and go to bed. Instead he found his wife waiting for him, sitting on the sofa of their living room with a datapad on her lap, looking up at him with a serious, expectant look on her face.

"Feylis?" he frowned, removing his jacket. "What's wrong?"

"Avan, I'm going to need your help with something."

"Of course. What is it?"

"I need you to call your security detail. We need to apprehend someone."

"You mean arrest them? There are police for that."

"I don't know if he's done anything worth arresting. But we need to talk to him, and we should have your guards just in case."

"Okay, we need to start again. Who exactly are we going to try and arrest? Apprehend, talk to, whatever."

"A regional manager in the quartermaster division for the Third Fleet. I believe he's been secretly shipping NRDF weapons to the human separatists on Bavinyar."

Avan stared at her. "How did you figure *this* out?"

"I was given a list of weapons they recently found on Bavinyar, in a BIL safehouse. It's all BlastTech and MerrSonn weapons that are contractually only sold to our military, but somehow they ended up on Bavinyar, apparently without going through an inventory on our end. I've spent all day auditing shipping contracts and processing records and I think I've found the source."

"Wait, back up. Where did you get this list? If this is an NRI job, they must have people who can apprehend this guy. What did you say his name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Aston Blake. I pulled his personnel records. He lives in Galactic City, about five kilometers south of Westport."

"Where was it from, Feylis?"

"Someone we can trust."

"But not through official channels?"

"It sounds like this is something Princess Leia wants investigated quietly."

"Leia? Are you sure this has her approval?"

Feylis seemed to hesitate for a second; then she nodded. Avan was tempted to call up Leia's personal frequency and ask her for verification, but he knew that if he did, Feylis would take it as a sign of distrust. Worse, she'd be right to.

Avan sighed and sat down next to her. He placed a hand on her knee and said, "We're not X-wing pilots anymore. We can't just flit off and do whatever we feel like, just because we think it's right."

She reached out and touched his own knee, the metal one to replace the right leg he'd lost in an X-wing crash that had ended his career as a fighter pilot. "Once a Rouge, always a Rouge," she said.

Avan grimaced. "If we try to apprehend Blake, and he's the wrong man, he might press charges. This could ruin both our careers."

Feylis shook her head. "You've let your senator's job make you cautious, Avan. The first thing we'll do is *talk* to him. I am in the same office as him, you know. We can call this an official inquiry."

"And that's why we're meeting him at his flat?"

"Better his apartment than the office, where he could delete records or make a scene."

"Do you really think this could help us defuse the Bavinyar crisis?"

"If we can stop the flow of weapons it definitely will. It might even lead us to the leadership for the human separatists. Trust me, Avan. This is something we have to do."

He moved his hand and placed it atop hers. "All right, I'll call my security detail. We'll go straight to Blake's quarters."

"Thank you." She smiled a smile that had lifted up his heart for twenty-five years and counting, but right then it didn't calm his doubts at all.

His security team came quickly, and after that all four of them set off in a speeder through the post-rush-hour traffic on Galactic City. The flow of speeders was still slow, but Avan insisted they not break the lanes; there had already been enough complaints about

senators and officials ignoring traffic rules because they thought it inconvenient, and he didn't want the embarrassment of being caught by CSE, especially not tonight.

It took them a half-hour to get to the tower where Aston Blake apparently lived. It was one of countless residential spires in Galactic City; not as bright and flashy as the residences near the government district and not the slums of the lower levels, it was the kind of middle-grade, middle-class residency one would expect for a civil servant with ten years on the job and (so Feylis said) no family living with him.

The tower's staff did nothing to get in the way of a senatorial security team. Instead, they pointed Avan, Feylis, and the guards to proper floor. When asked, one of them said that he'd seen Aston Blake enter the tower about four hours ago.

As they walked down the hallway, Feylis said in a half-whisper, "Let me go in first and talk to him. You and the guards should stay outside."

"What if he does something dangerous?"

Feylis flipped back the hem of her jacket, revealing a hold-out blaster tucked beneath one arm. She must have strapped it on while Avan was summoning security.

"I'll be all right, Avan," she said. "Besides, I don't think he'll put up a fight. He's not a murderer, he's a middle-grade bureaucrat engaging in corporate theft."

"Theft of weapons used to murder people. That's not any better. Do you have any idea why he might be helping to sell to the Bavinyar separatists?"

"No idea. According to his record he was born on Denon and spent most of his life on Coruscant. Nothing screams terrorist material. I'm guessing someone offered him extra credits to make some shipments disappear. He might not even know who he was selling to."

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Avan said as they found his door.

Feylis nodded and gestured for Avan and his guards to stand on either side of the doorframe. Once they were in position, she rang

the buzzer. Avan could faintly hear the muffled sound on the other side of the door.

They waited for a full minute before Feylis rang the doorbell. There was no response. Feylis rang one more time, and once more no answer came. Finally, Feylis pounded a fist on the door and said, "Lieutenant Blake, this is Commander Feylis Ardelle of the NRDF. I'm here on official business. Please open up."

They waited thirty seconds, and still no reply. Avan said, "He may have slipped out without being notice."

"He could even be asleep," a guard suggested.

Feylis bit her lip and asked, "Can we slice through the locking mechanism?"

The two guards exchanged wary glances. The other said, "It wouldn't be legal."

"Feylis, we can come back again," Avan said. "Or we can just wait for him."

"Slice the door," she said.

"Feylis-" Avan stopped and realized the two guards were looking at him for permission. Then he looked at Feylis and saw the dark determination on her face. Finally, he said, "Go ahead. Slice the door."

It took the guards less than three minutes to override the simple locking mechanism. When the door slid open they found themselves looking down a short hallway, toward a living room with a broad viewport looking out on the night skyline. The guards gingerly plucked their pistols from their holsters and walked slowly down the hall. Feylis and Avan followed. Avan got only a few steps in before he picked up a familiar scent in the air, a scent he hadn't been exposed to in a very long time.

He was, therefore, unsurprised when he turned a corner and saw a human figure slumped at the kitchen table. There was a scorch-mark in the wall behind him and a blaster on the tabletop, just beyond the limp open palm from which it had spilled.

"Now we call the police," Avan said.

News of the suicide of one mid-ranking officer in the Third Fleet's Coruscant quartermaster office would normally not have been of interest to a member of the New Republic Senate, much less one currently in the middle of a campaign for the highest office in the galaxy. Indeed, Senator Pwoe of Dac didn't learn of Aston Blake's death until the middle of the following day, when he received news from his Quarren chief of staff, Verrek.

The news was totally unexpected, especially as it was delivered just moment before he was due to talk with members of Coruscant's largest construction union. The meeting went ahead as planned, but all the while possible implications of Blake's death rattled around in the Quarren's head.

When he was finally freed from the meeting, he immediately commended Verrek and asked for further information on Blake's fate. His chief of staff was frustratingly unhelpful; he kept repeating that the apartment was under lockdown by local security forces and that NRI was rumored to have accessed Blake's apartment too.

By the time he got back to his office in the Senate building, Pwoe was already on the verge of panic. When he stepped into his suite and found Tav Brei'lya waiting for him, it took everything to keep from screaming.

"Greeting, Senator," Brei'lya said coolly. The Bothan had been Fey'lya's trusted aide for decades, though he'd never mastered the silky-smooth mannerisms of his boss; Brei'lya was known for his blunter approach.

"I'm sorry, but did you have an appointment?" Pwoe asked, wondering whether he should listen to what the furball had to say or just get rid of him.

"No. Something came up on short notice, I'm afraid."

"Well, I'm a very busy Quarren, as you can imagine. If you have a message, you can leave it and I'll get back to you later."

"I'm afraid I can't. I was told not to return to Councilor Fey'lya's office unless I brought you with me." He spread his paws and gave a helpless shrug. "I've already waited two hours. I shouldn't have to wait any longer."

"Is that a threat?"

"Merely a hope." Brei'lya bore his canines. "But the Councilor was quite clear. He must talk to you, in person, immediately."

Pwoe tried to calm himself. There was no guarantee, no guarantee at all, that Fey'lya had learned anything about Aston Blake. The scheming Bothan could always be trying to pull something else; he might even want to strike some kind of deal with Pwoe.

Or he could stand ready to bring the entire power of the Justice Department down on the Quarren's squid-shaped head.

All things considered, there was only one way to know for sure.

Forcing himself to look somewhat calm, Pwoe looked over his shoulder at Verrak and said, "When is my next meeting?"

"The delegates from Kuat Drive Yards, Senator. They're set to meet you in your office in one standard hour."

Pwoe looked back at Brei'lya. "I hope the Councilor can be succinct."

"I'll make sure he's aware of your timetable." Brei'lya nodded. "Now please, will you come with me?"

It took less than five minutes to be maneuvered to Fey'lya's office on the north edge of the senate building. While the old meeting hall had been destroyed in the terrorist bombing years ago, the office structure itself had been undamaged, and Fey'lya's suite had clearly been occupied continuously since the Senate's initial formation. The shelves were lined with gifts from notables from a hundred worlds, the floor covered with hand-woven Bothan carpets that had clearly been worn by many passing feet.

When Brei'lya led him to Fey'lya's office, he said, "The Senator has another appointment in one hour. He requests you finish your business by then."

The Bothan councilor, standing behind his wood-carved desk with the midday Coruscant skyline at his back, nodded. "Our conversation will not take that long. Please, leave us."

Brei'lya nodded. He stepped out of the room and the door slid shut behind Pwoe. It might have been paranoid, but the Quarren thought he heard a lock clicking into place.

As for Fey'lya, he stayed right where he was behind the desk, paws clasped behind his back, looking like the regal statesman he always presented himself as for the press. Pwoe knew how savage he could be in private, and the fact that he *wasn't* acting savage now-not yet- made the senator even more alarmed.

"Well, Councilor," Pwoe said icily, "I'm sure we're both very busy with our election campaigns, so please, let's get to the point of this."

Fey'lya said, "I'm not sure you're aware of this, Senator, but last night an NRDF officer named Aston Blake committed suicide in his Galactic City apartment."

He knew. Pwoe tried to stifle his panic. Fey'lya knew *something*. How much he knew mattered. So did how he knew it. If he had an ally in the CSF who was feeding him information under the table Pwoe might be able to use that to his advantage. It would be a desperate barter but that was all Pwoe had right now.

"Normally," the Bothan went on, "The unfortunate personal problems of one human would not be of concern to us. However, immediately before his death, a message was sent by him to my office. It was marked as being of great importance, for my eyes only. When I saw that this morning I was skeptical. But then I read his note."

Icy fear gripped Pwoe's mind, freezing even his panic. Fey'lya leaned over his desk and got the familiar predator's glare in his eyes. "According to his dying confession, Senator, Aston Blake was first contacted by your aide, Verrek, some four months ago. On Verrek's request, he agreed to make certain shipments of weapons due for the Third Fleet simply disappear before being entered in the NRDF's equipment catalog.

"According to that note, he then made sure those stolen weapons were passed to unspecified intermediaries. In his letter he insisted that he had no idea where those weapons were being shipped and had only accepted the job because of the money. He insisted he was not political and had no idea those weapons might be used to spark a civil war on a New Republic member world.

"I am inclined to believe him, given where his conscience drove him. However, even if Aston Blake only figured out too late where those weapons were going, someone must have been using him as a middleman. Given that it was *your* aide who initiated him into his illegal activity, it stands to reason that Verrek must have known to whom the weapons were bound."

"So tell me, Senator. Did you *know* your chief of staff was engaged in active treason, arming human supremacists in an attempt to undermine the election? Or are you merely so stupid you couldn't see what was going on under your tentacles?"

He stopped, waiting for a response. Pwoe's frantic thoughts finally took form beneath his panic. Instead of trying to answer Fey'lya's question he managed one of his own.

"Councilor," he asked, "Have you given that note to CSF or NRI?"

Fey'lya snorted. "I will give you some credit, Senator. You can be clever even when being very, very stupid."

"I had no idea!" Pwoe blurted. "It was Verrek, all Verrek!"

"Is that so? Good. Then I will forward a copy of Blake's note to both CSF *and* NRI. They can begin a full investigation of treason taking place within your office. I'm sure it will do wonders for your election campaign."

"Wait!" Pwoe held up a hand.

"Yes?"

"What Verrek did..."

"Yes?"

He couldn't bring himself to say it, so Fey'lya did it for him. "Senator, are you trying to tell me that *you* ordered Verrek to initiate illegal shipment of NRDF weapons to a human supremacist terrorist cell with hopes of disrupting this election?"

Pwoe looked down. He couldn't actually *say* it.

Fey'lya snorted. "You're a fool. What did you hope to gain from this, Senator? You were never going to win. Even if, somehow, you destroyed Behn-Kihl-Nahm's campaign you'd still have *me* to defeat in an election. And you could never do that."

"I could have," Pwoe muttered.

"No, you couldn't. Do you know why? I'll tell you. I have more connections than you. I have better fundraising. I have been in this senate since before there *was* a senate. And unlike you, Senator, I am not stupid enough to stoop to outright *treason* just to improve my odds in this election."

"If you give that to CSF and NRI, I'm ruined. I'll go to prison."

"Undoubtedly. If this were the Empire, a crime like yours would be worthy of execution. As it is, you'll rot in jail until some lowlife prisoner slips a vibro-knife in your back."

"Don't send them that letter!" Pwoe bleated. "I'll do anything you ask! Anything!"

Fey'lya smirked. "Ah, so now you become compliant."

"Please. That letter will *destroy* me."

"Perhaps I'll give you better than you deserve, Senator. Perhaps I will keep this between the two of us so long as you cease your campaign, effective immediately, and agree to endorse me. Make sure all your supporting senators switch to my side as well."

Pwoe nodded. "Yes. I can do that."

"I thought you would. But there's more."

"Anything."

"If you dropped out to simply endorse me, it would look strange if I don't pass a favor to you in return."

Pwoe felt faintly, strangely hopeful. "What kind of favor?"

"The kind where you, Senator, are put on my cabinet once I'm elected. It will look as though you, like the canny politician you pretend to be, traded your electoral support for a place in my new government."

"What's the catch?" There had to be one.

"The catch is that once you are on my cabinet you support my decisions in every way. Do you understand? *Every* way. If you ever try to tip any votes against me, I will make sure Blake's letter gets anonymously leaked to the news-nets."

"If they try to arrest me then, I'll tell them about this conversation."

"You can try." Fey'lya shrugged, "But it will be the word of the New Republic Chief of State versus that of a craven traitor who

supported terrorists for his own political machinations. If asked, I'll simply tell everyone that you came to me and struck a deal, your support in the election for a seat in my cabinet. I will realize, once pointed out, that this happened the day after Blake's suicide, then protest innocence, because after all, why would a busy councilor running for election take note of one middling lieutenant's suicide? The whole incident will stain my government, true, but I've recovered from worse.

"You, Senator Pwoe, will go to jail, and you will *never* recover from that."

Pwoe swallowed.

"You should be thankful I've giving you as much as I am, Senator," Fey'lya snarled. "What you did was reprehensible as well as stupid. If it were the Cereans, fighting for the right of non-humans against the BIL's racism, I could almost understand. But to support *humans*?" He shook his head in disgust. "You're very lucky I ended up with that note instead of another senator."

He was dead right in everything he said, and that was the worst part. Head bowed, Pwoe muttered, "Why do you think Blake sent the message to you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because I'm head of the Justice Council. Perhaps because he was a supporter of mine." The Bothan gave a brittle chuckle. "I must confess, *I* am a lucky one too, Senator. As it stands, I lost one vote and gained so much more. I am not a religious being, but if I were, I'd think that somebody out there likes me."

Leonia Tavira was in her cabin, enjoying a glass of Raltiiriain wine and feeling general accomplished, when the latest update from Pedric Cuf came in. She told Oskvarek to route it to her personal comm system, and a few seconds later, the human's blue holographic face appeared before her.

"Ah, Pedric," she smiled, "I'm so glad you're still alive."

"Alive and hale, thank you very much."

"I haven't heard anything about major BIL leaders getting captured. You're still safe, aren't you?"

"I am, but the Republic is using the latest attacks as an excuse to crack down on our entire operation."

"Have they captured any more storehouses?"

"No more than the ones I told you about last time."

Tavira nodded, satisfied. After Pedric's report from the day before, where he said some of the weapons she'd sold to the BIL had been seized by investigators, she'd decided to hasten the schedule and have Aston Blake killed before anyone could discover that he'd been the one secretly shipping weapons to Tavira, who'd in turn resold them to the Bavinyari separatists.

"I'm glad to hear you're safe," she said. "You should also know that I've taken steps to keep our past business dealings secure."

"Meaning what?"

"The NRDF officer who's helped us acquire your weapons is no longer breathing. My sources told me that New Republic investigators were getting close, so I had to take action. He won't be telling anyone he sold them to me, but unfortunately, that also means our supply has dried up."

She expected him to be angry, but he just nodded. "All right. We're well-armed for the moment anyway."

"Are you? You may have to deal with the New Republic military soon enough."

"If they intervene on Bavinyar, the BDF will move to stop them," Pedric said firmly. And that, Tavira thought, was something to consider.

"I'm glad to see you're confident," she said, "However, at this point I'm not sure what's left to our relationship."

"If you have military-grade weapons, Kolin will still be willing to buy."

"I don't suppose you'd accept Imperial ones."

Pedric's face screwed in distaste. "We have our limits."

"Of course," Tavira smiled. For all his protestations of hatred for everything the Empire had done against his people, Pedric never once showed any resentment at Tavira for her own Imperial past. That, too, was curious. "I don't see any need to stay in daily contact

anymore, but if more high-quality merchandise falls into my hands, I'll be sure to let you know."

"I would most appreciate it. I'm sure we'll speak again, Admiral. Until then."

The transmission winked out, and Tavira helped herself to another mouthful of wine. Oskvarek must have been waiting for her call to end, because her comlink buzzed with a message from the bridge.

"Yes, Captain, what is it?" she asked.

"You should check the prime news nets, Admiral. You should find it interesting."

"All right then," she hummed thoughtfully. "Thank you, Oskvarek."

Tavira shut off the link and turned on her holo-projector. She'd been expecting it, but it still brought a grin to her face. The networks were all reporting the same thing: that Senator Pwoe had dropped out of the presidential race and endorsed Borsk Fey'lya. The commentators were tossing around a variety of theories about this unexpected event, from health problems to sex scandals to backstage dealings between the two candidates. Best Tavira could tell, they hit upon every single possibility except the correct one.

It had been only fourteen hours since Tavira had sent, through intermediaries, a message to Fey'lya's campaign office claiming to be the suicide note of one Aston Blake, who said he'd been commissioned by Senator Pwoe to steal weapons from the NRDF and sell them, through unspecified intermediaries, to the human separatists on Bavinyar. That much, in fact, was true, though the note had been written by Tavira herself and sent immediately after she received confirmation from the Besadii that their assassin had killed Blake in his apartment.

Before sending the message, Tavira had considered that there was a negligible chance that Fey'lya would hand the suicide note over to investigators and Senator Pwoe would be hauled off to prison in stun-cuffs. But of course, the Bothan knew how to play the game, and he'd surely blackmailed the Quarren into leaving the

race the way he did. Either possibility would have been fine with Tavira, but this was better, all things considered.

She sat back in her sofa and drank her wine, watching all the stupid talking-head commentators babble on about things they didn't understand. They'd be going on for hours yet, and once her glass was done, she shuffled over to her liquor cabinet and poured another. Then she sat back down and watched the fools prattle on, sometimes breaking into haughty laughter at their stupidity.

It was a good way to spend a night.

—CHAPTER NINE—

As she went into Jadesei Syne's office for the second time, Leia didn't know whether to feel encouraged or not by the events of the past day. She was, to be sure, very relieved to see that crackdown on the BIL was accelerating. Thanks to a tip from a family member of a BIL operative, the cell that had conducted the terrorist attack on Lemurya had also been captured. Its leaders were being interrogated and its storehouses had been raided, once again yielding weapons of New Republic manufacture that matched those stolen from the Third Fleet by its regional quartermaster Aston Blake.

Blake's suicide was what unsettled Leia. The investigation team that scoured his apartment had found no personal records that might have told them to who he'd sold the weapons to. One of the captive BIL leaders had said that an independent arms dealer named Pedric Cuf had been delivering supplies, but they still had no clue as to whether this Cuf was working on his own or an agent for someone else.

She laid all of this out as best she could for Syne. The other woman sat at her desk, the Cephalia skyline lit up behind her,

nodding sometimes. She gave no comment until Leia made it clear that she'd said everything.

"Thank you for keeping me informed," Syne began. "And thank you for letting my BSA investigators take the lead on this case."

"We're here to preserve Bavinyar's institutions, not undermine them."

Syne nodded, grateful. "The question is where we go from here."

"Has the BSA picked up any more leads on where Aviran Kolin is?"

"None. He seems to have gone to ground well before those rogue cells stages terrorist attacks." Her dark eyebrows drew together. "Several BIL leaders we've captured have insisted that Kolin was not behind the assassination of Pohl-Had-Narr either."

"Do you believe them?"

"I'm not sure what they have to gain by lying. What about this arms dealer, Pedric Cuf?"

"NRI is looking into him. From the initial reports, though, there doesn't seem to be anything to look into. He's not on their list of noted weapons dealers, but the galaxy is full of small-time operations selling guns."

"Do you think he sold the weapons that killed Pohl-Had-Narr?"

"If BSA's guess is right, he was killed with a Republic-made weapon. This Pedric Cuf could have easily sold it, too."

"So does that mean it was another rogue cell that did it?" Leia shook her head. "It doesn't sound like this Kolin was running a tight ship."

"Kolin has always been bigger on zeal than on practical details."

"Did you ever know the man?"

"Only slightly. He's about my age but he grew up with an exile group on the Outer Rim, far away from the war with the Empire. He never fought them."

"What turned him into the zealot he is now?"

"I'm not in the position to say. I only know that he was one of the first human settlers to return to Bavinyar. I believe he came from a relatively prominent farming family whose land was taken by the Cereans. I'm sure that's what started his anger."

Leia settled back in her chair and sighed. She couldn't deny that the story of Bavinyar's human exiles tugged at something inside her. Syne had asked her to image what it would feel like if she had the chance to go back to Alderaan again; just entertaining the thought filled her with an aching longing. She still couldn't imagine what it would be like to return to your long-lost home, only to find that someone else had claimed your house instead. It was one humiliation piled on another, and she wasn't surprised that some of the exiles let their anger lead to violence.

Unsurprised, but still disappointed. None of that excused terrorism and assassination.

Leia asked, "If you do capture Kolin, do you think it will defuse these tensions? Or will it escalate them?"

"I understand the power of martyrs better than anyone and I don't intend to make Kolin one," Syne said firmly. "I still believe, despite all that's happened, that most humans and Cereans are perfectly willing to live side-by-side. The problem is firebrands like Kolin who make people feel like their backs are against the wall and encourage them to lash out."

"I hope you're right. What about the CPF?"

"Have you made any progress tracking the source of *their* weapons?"

"If we had, I'd have told you. Our people are still analyzing the recovery data from *Intimidator*, but there's a lot to go through and most of those computer cores are in bad condition."

"All right," Syne said with a small sigh. "If that's the case, we'll have to wait and hope our public action against the BIL will stay the CPF against and further reprisals."

"And if it doesn't?"

Syne's face was still but Leia could feel her consternation in the Force. "If it doesn't, the very Bavinyari institutions we both want to protect will be in jeopardy."

"I assure you, Prime Minister, I will do everything I can to preserve what Bavinyar has right now."

"I believe you, Princess. I just have the sinking feeling that our fates may be in someone else's hands."

Iella was frankly very relieved when Asyr's next call came in the middle of the day, when her husband and daughters were all out of the apartment. Wedge had never asked about the call she'd gotten in the middle of the night, and best Iella could tell he'd forgotten all about it, which made her feel relieved and guilty at once. When Asyr had disappeared all those years ago to start a new life in the Bothan underground, Wedge had merely been a friend, and Iella had never imagined that she would one day have to weigh her promise to Asyr against her loyalty to Wedge.

"I tried to call at a better time," Asyr said, and once again her transmission came voice-only, without a holo.

"It's all right," Iella assured her, and began with a summary of everything that had happened in the last few days, including everything Feylis Ardele had told her about tracking down Aston Blake as the leak the NRDF quartermaster's office and Blake's suicide, which according to the coroners had taken place around six hours before Feylis and her husband had found the body.

"And they haven't been able to glean anything from his personal files?" Asyr asked, frustrated.

"I'm afraid not. We know he was receiving payments for every delivery he made disappear, but they've all been from secure bank accounts based on Muunlinst."

"Muunlinst? That's Remnant territory."

"I know. I understand Gavrisom sent a personal request to his Imperial counterpart to get the banks to relinquish the relevant files."

"That's curious, though, using banks based in the Remnant."

"It doesn't sound like something the BIL would have."

"Whoever paid Blake was probably another intermediary. We still don't know if Blake knew who his weapons were going toward."

"If he killed himself, he might have had some idea."

"He also might have done it because he knew Ardele- or somebody else- was getting close to him. Assuming he killed himself at all."

Iella frowned. "The coroners said it looked like a clear case."

"There are always beings out there who know how to fool the police."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"No. That's the frustrating part. There's layers and layers of deception to this. Somebody's trying to pull the strings on Bavinyar, some outside force, and we still have no idea who."

Iella considered, then said, "If Blake was paid by someone with an Imperial bank account, it probably wasn't Fey'lya."

There was a long, long pause over the comm line before Asyr finally said, "We don't know anything for sure. Like I said, there are layers and layers to all this."

"What do you plan to do now, Asyr?"

"I'll stay on Bavinyar for a while longer. My primary contact is pointing me to some people in local security force. They *still* don't know who killed Pohl-Had-Narr. Multiple BIL cell leaders they've captured all report that neither they nor the BIL leader, Kolin, ordered the killing."

"They would," Iella muttered.

"No. These are the same people who proudly claimed terrorist attacks on three other islands. They're not shy about killing people and at this point they're already in jail, so it's not ilke they'd be hiding from punishment. There's something else going on here. I think if I can find whoever killed Pohl-Had-Narr we can find whoever's been meddling here too."

"You think the person who's been feeding the flames is the same one who set the spark."

"Exactly."

Iella took a deep breath. "Asyr, you're getting deep into some very tricky, very dangerous situations."

"I've been in them before."

Iella knew she had no chance in talking Asyr into playing it safe; in the years since she'd last seen her, the Bothan woman had become cold and determined, without anything left to lose. It saddened her, but she didn't see anything she could do, especially now that Asyr was halfway across the galaxy.

"Just be careful," Iella said finally.

"If I need help, can I count on you?"

"I'll do anything I can."

"Good. I'll be in touch, Iella. Goodbye for now, and thank you for everything."

"Goodbye, Asyr."

As soon as Iella said it, the connection was cut from the other end. Iella stepped away from the comm console and sunk down into the sofa. She looked around her apartment's living room, around the quiet place she and Wedge and their children had made for themselves. Until the past few weeks it had seemed impossibly distant from all the espionage and scheming and conflict that had made up so much of their lives. Now she wondered if it would ever seem that way again.

"Unfortunately," said Aryon Ven, "Unless the NRI can retrieve useful data from Aston Blake's personal belongings, we seem to have hit a dead end."

He tried not to show how tense he was as he stood before Harbin Kaice's desk. The BDF general sat there in his full pressed uniform, wounded arm in a white sling across his chest, brows furrowed in consternation. Since Kaice belonged to a different organization than the police officer, the general was technically not Ven's superior officer; however, the man's leathered fighting-nek face and martial bearing made him more intimidating than anyone in the BSA, and Ven had not been looking forward to making this report.

Kaice drummed heavy fingers on the tabletop before he asked, "Do you believe the NRI will share with you?"

Ven blinked. "They've been very forthcoming so far."

"No doubt they have." Kaice settled back in his chair.

"General, it's possible that we've uncovered all the links in the chain already. We know this Pedric Cuf figure delivered the weapons and we know Aston Blake was paid to slip them to the BIL. It's a short chain from Coruscant and Bavinyar, but totally possible."

Kaice raised an eyebrow. "Are you ready to stake your career on that supposition?"

"No," Ven admitted. "It's a long way from Coruscant to Bavinyar. It's possible Cuf might have directly received the weapons on the capital and flown them here, but if I were running a smuggling chain I'd like to add a few more links in, to make it harder to trace."

"My thoughts exactly. From what you can tell, does this Pedric Cuf seem like the kind of man to have a secret bank account in Imperial space?"

"Honestly, sir, I have no idea about Pedric Cuf at all, besides his name. Neither does Sham-Vi-Diin."

"Has the Republic requested the Empire hand over the information from the bank account?"

"It's more complicated than that," Ven said. He'd asked the same question to Tresk Im'nel only a few hours ago and repeated the answer as best he could now. "The bank on Muunilinst isn't government-owned. I understand the Chief of State has asked Pellaeon to put pressure on the bank to release that information, but in the end no one can legally make them disclose client information, especially not a foreign government. If the account was based on a Republic planet they could sent it to the courts, but there was no provision in the treaty that would let Coruscant sue an Imperial-based company."

"Probably why they paid out from it in the first place," grunted Kaice. "All right. Very well. I trust that you'll continue the investigation wherever it leads."

"Oh, yes, sir. Most definitely."

"All right. You may go now."

Ven was relieved to leave Kaice's office and relieved to get out of BDF headquarters in general. He was surprised to discover he felt more at home in BSA headquarters amongst all the Cereans than in the defense fleet's human staff.

When he returned, though, he found a Bothan waiting for him, and a Jedi no less. He'd spent a number of hours with Tresk Im'nel

over the past few days, which was almost enough to make him forget that he'd never met any Bothans or any Jedi until then.

"Good afternoon, Detective," the Bothan spread his furry paws. "Back from BDF Headquarters?"

"General Kaice requested a briefing," Ven nodded. He wanted into his office and closed the door behind him, giving him privacy to speak with the Jedi. "Do you have any more news from Coruscant?"

"I'm afraid not. Our investigators haven't been able to find any communication or banks records in Blake's personal files."

Ven frowned. "Nothing at all?"

The Bothan shook his head.

"To be honest, Master Im'nel, that sounds a little hard to believe."

"I suspect the same thing, but NRI hasn't found any signs of foul play either."

Ven sighed. "We seem to be at an impasse."

"You may conclude that, but you'd be wrong." Im'nel planted his balled fists on the desktop. "Tell me, Detective, how badly do you want to find Pohl-Had-Narr's killers?"

Ven frowned. "Very badly, of course. It's my job. More than that, I'm a Bavinyari citizen. Someone *killed* my prime minister. Of course I want to see them brought to justice. Having Blake kill himself half the galaxy away... That's not justice. I can't believe that the end of it."

Im'nel's fur bristled slightly, though Ven had no idea what that meant from a Bothan. The Jedi bore his forward fangs and said, "I was hoping you'd say that. Detective, I hope you won't feel betrayed when I tell you that NRI has additional field agents on Bavinyar besides the ones you've met."

Ven frowned. A part of him felt he *should* feel betrayed; plenty of Bavinyari, humans and Cereans both, expressed umbrage that the Republic had sent as many people as it had to their world. At the same time, it would have been foolish to expect a massive intelligence organization like the NRI to only limit its involvement to a single hulking Hortek agent.

"Can these agents help us break out of this dead end?" he asked. It felt like the only question that mattered.

Im'nel kept baring his canines; there was a light in his eyes that made Ven wonder whether those teeth marked a Bothan smile. The Jedi said, "I have an agent I would like you to meet. In order to protect her operation I'd like you not to mention this to your co-workers or superiors, not yet."

That was something else that should have given Ven pause; instead he said, "If it helps us solve this case, Master Im'nel, I have no problem with that."

"Excellent." He placed a paw on the detective's shoulder. "I had a feeling I could count on you."

It had been a while since Leonia Tavira had heard from the members of the Cerean Patriotic Front, and she was starting to wonder if that group hadn't gone to ground after its ill-timed attempt to assassinate Jadesei Syne. She'd frankly been hoping that the CPF would stage its own violent retaliation for the recent BIL terrorist attacks and felt disappointed when they didn't materialize.

She was, therefore, very encouraged when her Cerean contact Sar-Ekh-Marr sent an encrypted message requesting more weapons, along with a place and time for pickup.

From a practical standpoint, the CPF were better business partners than the BIL. All the equipment given to them was already stocked aboard *Invidious* after being salvaged from *Intimidator* years ago. She did not have to deal with the risk of pilfering material from NRDF stores, nor did she have to pay any treas-onous employees from her secure Muunlist accounts to get them in her possession. Selling to the CPF was simpler and more profitable; the only downside was that Sar-Ekh-Marr was, alas, not nearly as charming a business partner as Pedric Cuf.

When his corvette arrived and docked in *Invidious'* hangar bay, Tavira once more went down to meet him there, once more with Argriss and Grovlith behind her. The stern, black-bearded Cerean greeted her with a bow more perfunctory than polite and asked, "Is our shipment ready?"

"Of course. Is your ship prepared to receive?"

"It is."

Tavira raised a hand and snapped her fingers, and the crew behind her began to move two hovercarts loaded with weapon crates across the deck.

"You are of course free to inspect the merchandise," she said, "But you won't be leaving until I'm properly paid."

"Don't worry, we honor our agreements," Sar-Ekh-Marr said. She expected him to intercept the crates and begin picking them over before they even got aboard his ship, but instead he kept his eyes on Tavira and said, "I would also like to talk about another possible business arrangement, if we can speak in private."

She raised a black eyebrow. "I'm sure that can be arranged. I wish you'd told me in advance, though."

"Something came up suddenly," Sar-Ekh-Marr said, clearly reluctant to go into any more detail while Argriss and Grovlith were glowering down at him.

"Very well then," Tavira shrugged. "We can speak in my cabin, if you'd like."

"Your cabin will be fine."

Sar-Ekh-Marr signaled to two of his guards, and they followed behind him as Tavira, Grovlith, and Argriss marched down the ship's empty halls for her quarters. They made the journey in awkward, distrustful silence, but when they reached the entrance to her cabin Sar-Ekh-Marr's two guards remained in the hallway with Argriss and Grovlith, where they'd no doubt all eye each other suspiciously while they bosses engaged in conversation.

Once they stepped inside, Tavira gave Sar-Ekh-Marr a moment to stare all around the room and take in the smattering of spoils from twenty years of piracy. Smiling pleasantly, she moved for the liquor cabinet and asked, "Would you like a drink?"

The Cerean blinked, then nodded. "Something small."

"Very well." Tavira turned her back on him long enough to take a bottle of lomin-ale from her cabinet and pour two slim glasses. When she turned around he was still standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. She couldn't help but be amused; the zealous

terrorist was probably unused to the finer things in life, devoted as he was to his foolish cause. Pedric Cuf, terrorist or no, was at least capable of appreciating a little luxury. Tavira found herself rather missing the operative.

Tavira handed Sar-Ekh-Marr a glass and gestured to the sofa across from the holo-projector. "Please, sit down."

As the Cerean took a seat she used her free hand to unzip her jacket all the way. Sar-Ekh-Marr stared for a second at what little was on underneath, then took a sip of lomin-ale.

"I want you to know that I value good business partners," Tavira said as she sat down next to him and crossed one long leg over the other, boot-tip pointed toward him. "I also want you to know that I've established a very diverse network of them over the years. If there's anything you need, anything at all, I promise I can get it for you."

Sar-Ekh-Marr nodded, still very serious. "We will not win Bavinyar until we've expelled the humans."

"That will be quite a feat. How do you plan to accomplish it?"

"Prime Minister Syne must be removed and the BIL must be destroyed. And once that is done, the New Republic will withdraw all claims to the planet."

"As I said, that will be quite a feat. *How?*"

"The weapons you've given us will be the first step. We will force Syne to stand down from office."

"If Syne goes it might prompt a martial coup by the BDF, and *that* will prompt a New Republic intervention. How do you propose to deal with *that*?"

"We can make the BDF serve us."

Tavira raised an eyebrow, but he explained no more. The BDF warships could never fight off a Republic task force, and they'd certainly never fight to protect a Cerean government, not when most of the crew was human and, Tavira suspected, at least covertly sympathetic with the BIL.

"That being said, we could always use more fire-power," Sar-Ekh-Marr said. "That's why Palt-Ri-Gen, our leader, sent me here to discuss the possibility of hiring your services."

She stared. "Do you mean *Invidious*?"

He nodded, almost timidly, like he expected her to laugh in his face. She certainly felt like it. The idea of intentionally pitting her old undermanned destroyer against a Republic task force was beyond absurd.

Still, she had enough business sense to hold in her incredulity. As coolly as she could she said, "That's a very tall order. I'm not even sure this one ship would be any good. It shames me to admit this, but *Invidious* is not the fine fighting ship she once was."

"If the Republic wants to retake Bavinyar by force they can. We need to deter them from even making the attempt."

Apparently Palt-Ri-Gen wasn't a total fool after all. "This is a large gamble. I've been many things, but never a gambler. I should also remind you that the Republic wants this ship. The Republic wants me. If I were to place *Invidious* at Bavinyar it might make them more inclined to launch an offensive, not less. If you really want to deter intervention, you have to play politics."

Sar-Ekh-Marr's face was hard to read. The BIL and Pedric Cuf knew that the Republic was a mess of internal divisions and had clearly timed Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination to cause maximum chaos. The CPE, it seemed, had yet to learn how to play the game too.

"I won't turn down your offer right now," Tavira said, though he had every intention to do so eventually. "I am, however, willing to aid your cause in any other way I can. Providing, of course, I get proper remuneration."

"That won't be a problem," the Cerean said stiffly. "And as it happens, there are other ways Palt-Ri-Gen believes you can help us."

She tilted her head and waited for him to continue.

Sar-Ekh-Marr took another sip of lomin-ale, nearly finishing his glass, and said, "We are in need of information."

"Information is something I can do. Go on."

"We have allies within the Bavinyar Security Agency that have been passing on details about their investigation into the BIL.

They've discovered that the terrorists have been using weapons from the New Republic military."

"Oh, my." Tavira had to conceal a smile. "Are you saying the Republic is *in league* with the human separatists?"

"We're not sure," Sar-Ekh-Marr glowered. "We've also learned the identity of the smuggler who's been shipping those weapons to Bavinyar in the first place."

She stared at him and tried to hold in her shock. He'd been stony and polite so far and if he had any idea that *Invidious* was also supplying the BIL she would have seen signs of it so far.

She had no weapon on her person. There was a hold-out blaster in the cabinet across the room, and if she had to she could spring for it, but even if she threw her lomin-ale in the Cerean's face he'd still outdraw her.

Leonía Tavira was unaccustomed to feeling trapped.

She licked her lips and said, "Do you want me to try and track down this smuggler?"

"You have contacts in many places, as you said. You have a longer reach than us." He gestured to the room, indicating the whole ship. "If you can find him and capture him, or even kill him to stop the shipments, we would pay you for it."

Him, the Cerean kept saying. Tavira hid her confusion with a smile. "That's a job I'd be perfectly happy to take on. What's the name of this smuggler?"

"A human by the name of Pedric Cuf."

She blinked. "Pedric Cuf? I see. And what do you know about him?"

"Not much. Only that he comes from offworld to deliver the shipments. Apparently he never stays long on Bavinyar."

"I see." She bent her head down and sipped lomin-ale to hide her confusion. The Pedric Cuf that she knew had come to her as a representative of the BIL; he'd even claimed to be one of Aviran Kolin's closest allies. None of his behavior had caused her to question that.

She looked back at Sar-Ekh-Marr. "Tell me, do you know who his contact is in the BIL? Who does he work with?"

"I'm not sure, but apparently multiple captured BIL cell leaders have reported that Pedric Cuf is the man who provides shipments."

"I see. And I don't suppose he's on Bavinyar now?"

Sar-Ekh-Marr frowned. "I suppose he could be, but I doubt it. With the crackdown on the BIL he's probably flown off somewhere else. Like I said, he only comes to Bavinyar for weapon drops."

"I see," she repeated. "Do you have any clue as to what kind of ship he flies?"

"One of the sources said he flies an Action IV freighter."

That sounded very much like the Pedric Cuf she knew; very much, yet not at all. She took her last drink of Iomin-ale and said with a smile, "I promise I will look into this Pedric Cuf for you. If I can, I'll capture him for you myself."

"Thank you," Sar-Ekh-Marr bowed his head. "If you can capture him for us, and learn where he's getting those weapons, we will make it worth your while."

It took another two hours for the Cerean to lead their cargo, review it, and finally pay for it. Tavira spent most of that time silently running through all manner of option in her head, and when their corvette finally dropped out of *Invidious'* hangar and jumped to hyperspace, she immediately made her way up to the command deck and placed a call on Pedric Cuf's encrypted personal channel.

A part of her was expecting him not to answer at all, but after a minute-and-a-half wait, he finally did. His pale blue holo-image projected to life before her and said, "It's always a pleasure to see you, Admiral Tavira but I have to say I'm surprised by the call."

"There's no reason to be alarmed," she smiled sweetly. "I wanted to check on your safety."

"Really? That's very charming," Pedric smiled back. "However, I'm sure you have *another* reason."

"No, your safety is my concern right now. As you know, I have sources in the New Republic intelligence machine. They've slipped me some information that the BSA has been sharing with them."

"Go on."

"They've named *you*, Pedric. The Republic has appointed agents with your capture being their primary goal."

"Me? In what capacity?"

"I'm not privy to that. I only know that you've been marked as a special target, along with Kolin." She paused and tried to read his holographic face, but all she saw was mild concern. "You and Kolin aren't together now, are you?"

"No," he shook his head, "We've split up at the moment."

"That's good. Are you still on Bavinyar?"

"I'm *safe*," he insisted.

"On Bavinyar?"

"Yes. Why? Are you offering a place of refuge?"

How kind of him to offer the idea. "I might offer one, for a price."

Pedric snorted. "Mercenary to the last, aren't you, Admiral?"

"Of course. But you should remember that the Republic has wanted *me* for the better part of twenty years. If I am safe on *Invidious*, so are you."

"And your offer... Does it count for other BIL leaders as well?"

That was an interesting offer and she wasn't sure what to make of it, other than that Sarr-Ekh-Marr would be pleased. "It will affect my fee, but yes."

"All right. I'll consider that. But for now, I have a duty here. All of us do."

"I understand. For what it's worth, Pedric, good luck. You sound as though you'll need it."

"Thank you, Admiral Tavira. Is that all?"

"For now, yes."

"All right. We will speak again, I hope."

"I hope so as well. Goodbye, Pedric."

She turned off the holo and for a long moment stood in silence on the bridge. She heard Osvkarek clear his throat behind her and spun back on the Trandoshan.

"Captain," she said, "Can we trace the other end of that call?"

"Of course." Oskvarek moved over to the comm console. "It says the receiver was located on Bavinyar."

"And you're certain?"

"Yes. It's possible he was using a relay to transmit his stream to a second location, all the data we received *did* come from Bavinyar."

Tavira scowled and began to pace the bridge. Oskvarek asked, "What is it, Admiral?"

"I'm not sure yet. That's the problem."

It was always possible the CPF simply got bad information about Pedric Cuf, but she doubted that. She realized now that she'd been foolish, taking Pedric's word that he was on Kolin's right-hand when he might have been running an independent job. He might have simply been inserting himself as another middle chain in the supply link for the sake of profit, but if that was all, he'd have no reason to be on Bavinyar right now. He'd certainly have no reason to stay on Bavinyar even after Tavira warned him the Republic was after him, not after she'd offered him shelter.

Assuming he was on Bavinyar. Assuming he trusted Tavira to give him shelter.

Right now, assumptions were all Tavira had to go on.

"It's too much Captain," she muttered. "Too much we don't know."

The Trandoshan, who knew nothing of her conversation with Sar-Ekh-Marr, was even more confused. "What should we do now?"

"For now?" She stopped pacing. "We wait. And hope Pedric Cuf needs our help."

That was the best option, she thought. If Pedric Cuf came aboard she'd find out what game he was really running, even if she had to use torture, and in the end she'd probably hand his corpse over to the Cereans for whatever fee should could wrangle from them. She'd always liked the man; she'd found him charming and attractive and intelligent and admirably ruthless. She saw now that she'd let her guard down, and for that alone, Pedric deserved whatever ugly fate she could give him.

As for Oskvarek, he didn't understand any of it, but he nodded anyway.

—CHAPTER TEN—

The next time Asyr got a request to go meet with Tresk Im'nel, she was surprised at the location. According to the message, she was to go to the BSA headquarters for Cephalia's northwest precinct, where Tresk would meet her. She was certain the message was authentic so she agreed to go, though with trepidation. She'd gone to considerable lengths to avoid being seen with Tresk and certainly to avoid making her presence known to local authorities. Now Tresk seemed ready to smash that precedent, and she had no choice but to trust him.

When she stepped through the front doors, a young human BSA officer immediately approached her. He identified himself as Aryon Ven and led Asyr to a small meeting room walled off from the rest of the head-quarters offices. Tresk was already there, seated atop the plain white table in the room's center with his arms crossed over his chest.

"It's good to see you again, Asyr," Tresk nodded. "I see you've already met Detective Ven."

"Very briefly," Asyr nodded to the young human. If he was phased by being in the same room with two Bothans, he didn't

show it. He must have known more about what was going on than she did, not that that said much.

"Detective Ven is one of the main officers assigned to investigate Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination," Tresk continued. "I think that's something all three of us should be talking about right now."

Asyr looked back at the human. She was surprised he'd been assigned such an important case, especially when he was so young; it showed not just in his face but in his eyes, and the eyes never lied. She wondered if he'd simply been thrown into the investigation as a token human amidst all the Cerean police officers.

"Detective Ven," Tresk continued, "This is Asyr Sei'lar. She's working with the NRI independent of Colonel Pakpekkatt's division. I believe you two could help each other."

"I hope so," Ven said seriously. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but the investigation into Pohl-Had-Narr's death has stalled out. There's even some doubt as to whether the BIL was involved at all."

"The Cerean separatists?" Asyr asked.

Ven shook his head. "We don't think so. We're running out of leads."

"I was hoping you two could help each other," Tresk said.

Asyr looked at him sidelong. She didn't think lying to a supposed ally about her being NRI was very Jedi-like, but Tresk seemed confident enough about this, so she tried to be confident too.

Facing Ven, she said, "We've been trying to find out who has been supplying the BIL. I've heard that your people think a Republic-made weapon was used to kill Pohl-Had-Narr-" she waited for him to nod, "-and I think our main goal should be to try and track down the man some BIL members have said shipped them weapons."

"Pedric Cuf," said Ven. "We've gotten that name from some captured cell leaders. My partner in this investigation, Sham-Vi-Diin, has been handling a lot of those. So much, actually, that he's barely had any time to work *this* case even though it's supposed to be our top priority."

"So they're shifting manpower from this investigation to breaking the BIL as a whole?"

"That's right. After all the attacks, I guess they think that's the main priority." He was trying not to sound dejected, with little success.

"It's not unreasonable," Tresk said. "Right now, Prime Minister Syne's goal is to prevent the cycle of violence from spiraling more. She feels that breaking the BIL is the best way to do that."

"And keep the Republic from intervening," Ven said.

They were both right. And of course, dismantling the human separatist league would also be a statement for a human woman than some saw as having been put into office because of their violence.

"I'll be more than happy to help catch Pedric Cuf," Asyr said, "But there's no reason to even think he's on this planet. I'm not sure how much good I can do us here."

"Whoever his contacts are, they're still here," Tresk said. "Pedric Cuf could be any place in the galaxy, but his links to this crisis are somewhere on Bavinyar, maybe in Cephalia right now. If we handle it right, they can even give us Pedric Cuf."

"All right," Asyr said with a small sigh. "How do we begin? And what can *I* accomplish that the police can't?"

"You have contacts with NRI and beyond, contacts that helped us find the place where NRDF weapons were being leaked to arms dealers," Tresk said, more for Ven's benefit than hers. "As for Detective Ven, I'm sure you have sources befitting your profession."

"I do," the young man nodded. "I was going to talk to BDF and investigate their traffic control records. I'm hoping we can find a way to pin down which ship Pedric Cuf was using, even if he used fake identification codes."

"That sounds like an excellent place to start." He put one hand on Asyr's shoulder, one on Ven's. "Together, I think you two can help each other immensely."

Asyr didn't know if Tresk was using a little kick of his Force powers, but she had to admit that she felt just a little bit better about this.

Aryon Ven had never spent much time off Bavinyar; even the short flight from Cephalia up into orbit made him a little space-sick, and he tried to hide his queasiness when he stepped onto the deck of the BDF traffic control ship *Yvolton*, where he was warmly greeted by its captain, a woman less than ten years older than him.

As he was led through the hallways of the *Carrack*-class light cruiser, he couldn't help but be struck by how different this BDF naval crew was from the BSA policemen he saw in Cephalia every day. For a start, the vast majority were human instead of Cerean; they were also, as a whole, visibly younger. Most of the Cerean police officers looked middle-aged, and that meant a lot considering Cereans had longer lifespans than humans. Generally it made Ven feel like a constant child in their company. By contrast, he passed human BDF officers with lieutenant's stripes who looked younger than he was.

Yvolton was not the most powerful ship in Bavinyar's local defense fleet, but it was the centerpiece of Bavinyar's orbital traffic control system. He was pleased that his association with the BSA and the Pohl-Had-Narr investigation still worked in his favor, and the offers aboard *Yvolton* did everything in their power to help him search through the flight records for any Corellian Action-model freighters on supply runs. It was a common type and ship, and even a relatively low-traffic planet like Bavinyar received many visits by such vessels. Ven recorded the flight routes and times for all such vessels before taking his copied data back down to the surface.

That evening he met with the Bothan NRI agent, once more in Cephalia's northwest precinct office. The black-furred alien worked with him to parse through the data and try to identify the ships that might have been carrying weapons to the BIL.

"This isn't very helpful," Ven sighed at one point. "All these ships transmitted manifests, but there's no way to tell which are fake or not."

"Search based on time," Asyr said. "See if we can identify which might have made drops right before major BIL attacks."

"They might have been stockpiling weapons for months. There's no way to be sure."

The Bothan woman tried hold up a sense of optimism, but as they continued to work with the data it was clear they'd need more variables. Ven was about to try and comm BSA central headquarters and leave a message for Sham-Vi-Diin, his erstwhile partner, when there was a knock on the door to their room.

Ven had repeatedly obfuscated when asked what the Bothan woman was doing at the precinct office, and were it not for his newfound celebrity he probably wouldn't have gotten away with it. He braced himself for another awkward conversation when he opened a door and found a young Cerean officer looking up at him.

"Detective Ven," she said, "There's a visitor that's come to see you."

"A visitor? For me?"

"Yes, Detective. He's a civilian. His name is Rev Lessex."

The name was utterly unfamiliar. He said, "I'll be out in a moment," and waited until the door was closed to look back at Asyr. "Does that sound familiar to you?"

The Bothan shook her head. "You should go talk to him, whatever it is he wants."

"Agreed. You should stay here. Hopefully this won't take long."

Asyr nodded and remained at the table while Ven slipped out and went down the hallway to the same lobby where he'd met Asyr a few days previous. Sure enough, there was a human man there, dressed in civilian clothes, with dark skin and a shaved-bare head. His alert blue eyes immediately picked up Ven when he stepped around from behind the security desk.

"Ah, detective!" the other man said, and he practice-ally lurched up to offer his hand.

Ven shook it and asked, "Thank you for calling on me, Mr. Lessex. What can I do to help you?"

"I remember you, Mr. Ven," Lessex replied, still squeezing his hand. "I recognize you from that broad-cast they made after Pohl-Had-Narr was assassinated."

"I'm glad." Ven smiled thinly. "Now, is there some-thing specific you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Oh yes," Lessex nodded and finally released Ven's hands. "It's been so long and I hadn't heard anything about the investigation, or any progress you've made."

"We're still working on it," Ven said simply. He wasn't sure what else to say, or why this man had gone to the trouble to track him to his currently location.

"I think I might be able to help. At least, I hope I can." Lessex leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. "I have some information. I'm not positive it will help, but I figured you were the one I needed to talk to."

Ven glanced around at the guards who watched with thinly-veiled interest from behind the security desk. "I take it you want to talk someplace private?"

"Yes, definitely," Lessex said, voice still low.

"All right. I'm sure we can arrange that."

It took Ven a minute to find another room like the one Asyr Sei'lar was currently working in. This one was at the far end of the same hall but was otherwise identical; Lessex sat down at the white table, shifting nervously in his chair as Ven remained on his feet.

"Now then, Mr. Lessex, what kind of information do you think you have that could help us?"

Lessex became suddenly awkward. He looked down at the hands in his lap. "Well, Detective, I'm not quite sure how to say this."

Ven was, truth be told, starting to get annoyed. "Let's start with why you're here right now. What motivated you to come see me?"

Lessex sighed and kept staring at his hands. "This is about my brother. I believe he's... involved with the BIL."

Now they were getting somewhere. "Why do you think that?"

Lessex sighed. "We live together with our younger sister in the southeast past of Cephalia, along the Corniche. Just south of Martyr's Square. Do you know the area I'm talking about?"

Ven nodded an affirmative. The southern part of Cephalia was primarily made up of human neighborhoods, and the ones strung along the seaside near the Corniche were typically inhabited by new immigrants to Bavinyar who had yet to find well-paying jobs in the

city or in the mining islands to the south. Frankly, it had acquired a bit of a reputation as a slum, full of poor humans who'd come back to their fabled home-world only to find it had nothing to offer them.

Lessex went on, saying, "Our parents were killed by the empire but Sarissa, Javen, and I always tried to stay together. But Javen, he started, well, hanging around with types I didn't trust. A few times he even brought some of them back to our flat, though I didn't get a chance to hear what they were talking about. At first, I thought he might be getting involved with some pretty crime or something, but now I'm not sure. The very day after Pohl-Had-Narr was killed, Javen just vanished, instantly. I had no idea what happened. I still don't."

"Did you file a missing person's report?"

He shook his head. "What was I supposed to say? That I thought brother might be a criminal, or that he might have had something to do with the prime minister's death? I don't know any of that for sure."

"So why did you come to me? And why now?"

Lessex sighed again. "Everything seems like it's going crazy, and we still don't know who killed Pohl-Had-Narr. Then I remembered *you*, from the broadcasts, and I thought if I should talk to anyone at the BSA, it would be you. So I called the headquarters and they told me I could reach you here."

The man couldn't bring his eyes up to meet Ven's at any time. He was clearly confused and afraid to trust anyone, and Ven could sense the immense effort it had taken him to come and talk to the police now. And he knew, too, that Lessex was only trusting him now because they were both human, and that Lessex was ashamed to admit it out loud.

He had to admit his heart went out to this man. He knew growing up by the Corniche couldn't have been pleasant, and many members of the BIL had been recruited from that and similarly downtrodden areas.

"I'd like to help you with your search, personally," Ven said.

"Oh, that's excellent!" Lessex's head popped up. He reached into his jacket pocket and drew a piece of flimsy, on which he'd written a long scribbled list of notes, mostly affixed to dates and times.

"I put this together for you," Lessex said as Ven picked up the somewhat messy document and looked it over. "These are some times I remember seeing my brother with those strangers I mentioned, and times when he stepped out without warning, like he'd been suddenly called someplace else."

One notation, sloppily handwritten, immediately jumped out at Ven. It gave a date and time and beside that it said *Stepped out – went to landing complex – for what?*

It might be the extra piece of data they needed to locate when Pedric Cuf had made his drops. It was a long shot, and the odds that such a great snippet of information would fall into his lap right now, while Asyr was still parsing the flight records down the hall, was almost too good to be believed.

He looked back at Lessex. "You must have a very good memory, to have put this together from scratch."

The man looked at his hands again. "I keep a journal. A private one. I've been worried about my brother for a long time. He's always had... questionable judgment. But I never thought he could be involved in anything like *this*."

"I'll tell you what, Mister Lessex, it's going to take me some time to look into this. But how about this? We'll exchange comm freqs so you can call me and I can call you any time either of us finds important new inform-ation?"

Lessex nodded eagerly. "Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. And I'll help any way I can with this. I don't know the names of the men he met with, but I think I could recognize them again if I had to."

"That's very helpful, Mister Lessex. I promise I'll do everything I can to get to the bottom of this. Every-thing I can."

After exchanging comm freqs with Lessex and seeing him out the front door, Ven practically ran back down the hall to the meeting room where Asyr was still at work going over flight patterns.

Ven went right up to her and slapped the flimsy down. He tapped the line about Lessex's brother going to the landing pads and said, "This might be what we need. Cross-check it and see if any CEC Action freighters set down at that time."

The Bothan frowned. "Where did you get this?"

"The visitor I just saw off. He's a human who's asking about his missing brother. He went missing right after Pohl-Had-Narr died. This is a list the guy made about his brother's movements leading up to the assassination."

Asyr kept frowning. "He just showed up and gave all this to you *now*?"

"I know. It's quite a coincidence."

"I'm not in the habit of trusting coincidence."

"Neither am I, but I think this could be really useful."

"The visitor, what was he like?"

"Scared. Confused. He wants to protect his brother, I think, which is why he didn't go the BSA about any of this until now."

"This could be about something else entirely," Asyr reminded him.

"I know, but it's worth a shot. Cross-check that time and date. See if there's any incoming flights that might match it."

Asyr did as she was told, and Ven hovered over her shoulder, looking at her screen. He felt his pulse quicken as he saw the flight record for a cargo delivery by an Action V-model freighter called the *White Night* under a captain named Xandel Harbrid. According to the traffic logs, the freighter set down once for delivery at the main landing complex south of Cephalia, then took off and flew down to the southern hemi-sphere, where it made another drop, this time on the island of Leonal.

"What's the second location?" Asyr asked him.

"It's a major mining site."

"All human population?"

"Pretty much. There's a lot of rumors that the corporation running it fronts a lot of money for the BIL, and we know its president had some ties with Aviran Kolin in the past, but investigations have never been able to prove anything." He added

with a frown, "Of course, we haven't had the resources to launch any-thing thorough until recently."

"This shows Cuf set down for only four hours at Cephalia." She glanced at the flimsy Lessex had provided. "The times seem to match. Do you think you can pull footage from security cams?"

"The port is government-run, so its security cams are handled by BSA. It should be no problem." Once this over, Ven was going to regret not being able to get anything just by asking. "I'm going to try and make a copy of it. Our contact said that he sometimes saw his brother with suspicious people. If he can identify his brother or any of those guys in the security footage, that might be our break."

"What about records from Leonal?"

"I'm not sure about those," Ven shook his head. "Everything there is privately owned. I'm not sure how happy that mining corp is going to be when I ask them to hand over their data."

"Can't you force them to, legally?"

"Yes, but that'll take time. And if there *were* illegal weapon shipments coming off that ship, they'll use that time to delete or modify the records we want."

Asyr sighed. "Well, you should at least get to the port on Cephalia as soon as possible. That might be the drop we're looking for."

"Is there any other record of a freighter called *White Night* in any of those flight registers?"

Asyr tapped a search key into her datapad. "I don't think so. But then, he might have flown in with a new ID every time. If I were running illegal guns, that's what I'd do." She looked up at him. "So what's the running theory now? Do we think Pedric Cuf made one drop where he sold weapons to a rouge cell on Cephalia, then another to the second island?"

"Leonal."

"-to Leonal, where he dropped his weapons off with Kolin, or one of Kolin's allies?"

"That seems to be the theory. And frankly, it's the best lead we've gotten since this damned case began."

Asyr's frown came back. "It still seems a little too good to be true."

"I know. But we can't afford *not* to check it out."

"Agreed. What should I do?"

"Go back to your hotel. Wait. In a little while I'll come and meet you there. I might bring my contact, Lessex, along too."

"If you think that's wise."

"Like I said, I think it's the best plan we've had in a while."

Ven started for the door. Asyr gathered her things and followed him out. They walked together down the hallway and out toward the lobby. When they stepped through Ven was surprised to see all the front-desk security staff clustered around a holo-projector. None of them spoke; their eyes were all glued to the screen with expressions of surprise and, it seemed to him, raw horror.

"What is it?" he asked as he slipped his way next to them. "What do you see?"

The Cerean next to him gestured feebly toward the projector, where a human female newscaster was speaking to her audience. "It's the CPF," he said. "They've made their move."

"What did they do?" Asyr asked behind them.

In their shock, none of the guards seemed to care about this strange Bothan visitor. The Cerean who'd just spoken shook his head and said, "They've seized the mining complex at Leonal. They say Palt-Ri-Gen is there himself. He's taken over the whole island, and he's demanding Syne step down immediately."

—CHAPTER ELEVEN—

Ever since the BIL's terrorist attacks on Maressa, Lemurya, and Shaldonia, Sham-Vi-Diin had been awaiting some kind of reprisal from the Cerean separatists. When it didn't come quickly he allowed himself a modicum of hope that, just possibly, Syne's very public crackdown on the BIL would dampen their desire for vengeance.

In the end, he wasn't surprised when the CPF's reprisal came; he was surprised by the boldness of it. He'd been working with the BSA's interrogation teams when the news came through, and Korr-Mad-Narr had immediately called him back to headquarters to talk over the matter.

Sham-Vi-Diin found the BSA director in his office, watching or re-watching the broadcast that had, by now, been played by every news channel on Bavinyar and probably in the entire New Republic. It showed a tall Cerean with a long black beard pacing up and down in front of rows of captured human, waving an E-11 blaster rifle in the air as he talked. Yet despite his violent, thuggish countenance, Palt-Ri-Gen's words were crisp and controlled.

"For the good of Bavinyar," he said, "For the good of *all* its citizens, Jadesei Syne must relinquish her post immediately. This is the only way we will have justice for Pohl-Had-Narr and for all the innocent civilians who had been butchered in the recent offensive by the Bavinyar Independence League.

"It should be clear to everyone that Jadesei Syne has come to the highest office on Bavinyar thanks to BIL violence. She has made a show of trying to take down the terrorist organization that put her in power, but we all know it is only a show. Where is Aviran Kolin? Where are the humans responsible for murdering our democratically elected Prime Minister? Unless Syne can show us she is serious about bringing peace to Bavinyar, for *all* Bavinyari, she must stand down immediately.

"I want no further bloodshed, but until we have a leader who is capable of ending the BIL and bringing us justice for our dead, the bloodshed will not step. These humans you see behind me are not hostages. They are prisoners of war. The mining facility on Leonal has been used to funnel money and supplies to the BIL for years. Syne knows this. The BDF and even the BSA know this but they've done nothing. In the name of the greater good of Bavinyar, I, Palt-Ri-Gen of the Cerean Patriotic Front, have taken it upon myself to remove Leonal from Kolin and Syne's war machine.

"I only pray that the rest of my fellow Bavinyar will finish what I've started and remove the Bavinyar Independence League from our world. Only then can we *all* have peace."

When the transmission was over, Korr-Mad-Narr sighed and turned off his holo-projector. He spun in his chair to fix a dark glare on Sham-Vi-Diin.

"He's played his full hand," the director said. "I give him credit for his bravery. While Kolin sulks some-where and hides from justice, Palt-Ri-Gen lays himself out."

"Director, what are we going to do?"

Korr-Mad-Narr's glare didn't go away. "At the moment we're standing by, awaiting instructions from our prime minister."

Have we sent people to Leonal yet? Have we laid down a perimeter?"

"No. I suspect Syne wants to use the BDF for that," Korr-Mad-Narr sniffed. "Frankly, I'm not certain she trusts us."

"Then, sir... Are we to do nothing?"

"The future of this entire planet is at stake. I assure you, we will *not* do nothing."

"Then what *will* we do?"

"Plans are in motion. Detective, I want you to remain at BSA headquarters until further notice. We're going to need you in the days to come."

"You mean to investigate the BIL? Sir, I'm so sorry we haven't been able to track Kolin."

"I know, Detective, but that's now what I mean. You're an established face thanks to the investigation. We've already put you in front of the holo-cams and we may need to do it again."

"What do you mean?" Sham-Vi-Diin felt a spike of dread run down his spine.

"That's not important. I just want you to be ready, Detective."

"Then... What should I do until then?"

"Report to your office. Stay there. Gather all the materials you've gathered on Kolin, Pohl-Had-Narr, and the BIL and be ready to give a full presentation at any time."

"To whom? The press? Prime Mnister Syne?"

"Your colleagues in the BSA," Korr-Mad-Narr spread his hands. "Can you do that?"

Sham-Vi-Diin nodded stupidly. "Of course, Director."

"Then do it. Dismissed. I'll contact you when the time comes."

Sham-Vi-Diin knew when he was supposed to shut up and go. He shut up and went. In the short time it took to go back down to his office his sense of niggling dread only increased. He remembered that Korr-Mad-Narr hadn't made any mention of his partner in the instigation; granted, Sham-Vi-Diin hadn't seen much of the younger human yet either, but his face would be just as important for the holo-cams.

By the time he got to his desk Sham-Vi-Diin finally admitted it to himself. Korr-Mad-Narr sounded like a man preparing for a coup.

Odds were good that Korr-Mad-Narr would be monitoring his comlink. Thankfully, years of experience in counter-terrorism and planetary security had taught Sham-Vi-Diin a few tricks. He locked the door to his office and began a series of modifications to his comm that would scramble his outgoing call. Then he dialed up his partner Aryon Ven and waited for the human to respond.

When he heard the click of the call being received, Sham-Vi-Diin said in a low voice, "Detective Ven, can you hear me? Please respond."

"I'm right here, sir," the other said.

"Detective, what is your location?"

"I'm at the spaceport. I just got a sudden lead to the Pohl-Had-Narr case."

"Really?" Sham-Vi-Diin stiffened. "What kind of lead?"

"It would take a while to explain, sir. I'm sorry I haven't been keeping you updated on my progress. I'm just about finished, sir. I haven't received any instruction from headquarters. Should I be coming back now?"

"No," Sham-Vi-Diin said at once, firmly. "Whatever evidence you have, I want you to keep it safe. I want you to keep *yourself* safe. Any information you can gather about whoever is actually responsible for these attacks may be what we need right now."

"I understand that, sir, but why should I avoid HQ?"

Sham-Vi-Diin swore under his breath. "Detective, I don't know if it's safe for you right now. Do you have someplace else you can go, someplace no one else knows about?"

After a long tense pause, Ven said, "I think so, sir."

"Good."

"But sir... What's *happening*?"

"Nothing yet. But if you *do* receive orders from headquarters, let me know before you do *anything*. Is that clear?" There was another pause. "Please, Detective. I need you to trust me. Can you do that?"

"...I think so, sir. And if I find anything new about the Pohl-Had-Narr's murder, can I come to you with that?"

Sham-Vi-Diin considered his situation: practically on lockdown, a prisoner in his own office, desperately hoping he could hide his activities from superiors he found he could no longer trust.

But Aryon Ven's situation sounded just as bad. If Korr-Mad-Narr really was involved in some potential ouster of the prime minister, there was no way he'd let a human BSA officer into his trust. Sham-Vi-Diin barely even knew the young human, despite working together for over a year. Suddenly it seemed like they had no one to trust but each other.

"Yes," he said at last, "But communicate only via commlink, understand? I'm not sure if the communications system in the office is secure."

There was another long, ominous pause before Ven said, "I understand, sir. I'll let you know. And... thank you."

"Good luck, Detective."

"Yes, sir. You too."

The line clicked off. Sham-Vi-Diin sat back in his chair and waited, waited, waited for someone to come for him. But he waited, and no one came.

When the news came from Coruscant, Behn-Kihl-Nahm was hardly surprised; only disappointed. When he went to Princess Leia's quarters to deliver it, he was actually a little relieved to find that Gavrisom was already there. One look at the grim expressions on Leia and her husband told him the Minister of State had explained everything, saving Behn-Kihl-Nahm himself at least a little bit of trouble.

As he joined took a seat in the sofa across from Leia, the Cerean offered the meager comfort he could. "At least," he said, "Minister Beruss was able to delay the vote until you return to Coruscant."

"I'm not sure what good that will do," Leia leaned forward like a heavy weight were on her shoulders. "Fey'lya already had enough support to push through a re-hearing of his first bill. That says a lot as it is."

"I know your place is in the Senate," Gavrisom whistled, "But what do you wish us to do, Princess?"

Leia sighed and looked at Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom. "Minister, I think you should stay here. As our top diplomat, I believe you still have a chance at resolving this situation peacefully. In any case, we need to retain *some* New Republic presence on this world. I'm only afraid that anyone who stays here might be in danger. There's no telling how much this will escalate."

"No position is without risks," Gavrisom shook his head, ruffling his feathery mane. "I have no opposition to remaining here, Princess. None."

"All right," Leia sighed again. "I'm not sure what to do with the rest of the staff. With Tresk, Kenth, Pakkpekatt, and the others."

"Your NRI guy is intimidating," Leia's husband spoke up for the first time. "I'd say bring him back with you. He can also give a full report to the senate and intimidate *them*."

"You'll still have Pakkpekatt's other two agents on this planet, with diplomatic credentials from my office," Gavrisom reminded her.

"All right," Leia nodded, "Pakkpekatt comes with me. I think Kenth should come too. If we *do* end up bringing the military into this, I want them to be able to liaise with someone who's seen the situation on the ground."

"What about Tresk?" asked Han.

Leia's brows drew together. "I think I'll let Tresk stay, if he decides to."

"One lone Bothan's going to stand out in Cephalia," Behn-Kihl-Nahm reminded her.

"I now, but he's a Jedi too. He can take care of himself."

"All right then." Behn-Kihl-Nahm placed his hands on his knees. "I believe that only leaves me."

Leia fixes her tired eyes on his. "I won't force you to do anything, Bennie. I know you have a lot of variables to consider."

"I appreciate that, Princess." Behn-Kihl-Nahm laughed dryly and shook his head. "Fey'lya has me both ways, doesn't he? If I don't go to vote in-person, he'll say I'm derelict in my duties of government. If I do go, he'll say I've abandoned my role as Bavinyar's representative."

"Don't care about what that furball says," Han Solo said gruffly. "What do you think can help this mess get less messy?"

He said it like it was so easy. Behn-Kihl-Nahm held Leia's eyes, though, and saw uncertainty to match his own.

Gavrisom cleared his throat with a whistling noise and said, "I believe you should stay here, Minister. Aside from my personal preference to have another senior cabinet member here, I believe that, as a Bavinyari, you stand a better chance at reasoning with Syne or Palt-RiGen than I do."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm liked to believe that was the case, but he couldn't muster it. He'd spent more years of his life away from Bavinyar than on it, mostly attending to matters of galactic political importance while his own homeworld lurched steadily toward this looming disaster. Everything he'd encountered since coming here had made him feel more and more detached from the world on which he'd once lived. In turn it made him feel more and more like a failure- to himself, to the Republic Senate, to Bavinyar- but that was some-thing he could hardly explain to Leia or Gavrisom.

And yet, in the end, the Minister of State was right. He stood the potential to do more good here than on Coruscant. What kind of good, he didn't know, but he'd forever feel like a failure if he didn't try.

And as for Fey'lya, he was welcome to spin it however he liked. Behn-Kihl-Nahm knew his political fortunes were in deadly peril as it was; if anymore bloodshed happened on Bavinyar, the election would be forfeit.

"I will stay here," he said at last.

From the look on Leia's face, it had been the answer she'd expected all along. "I'll do my best on Coruscant, Bennie, I promise."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm sighed. "Princess, I'm no longer certain that Borsk Fey'lya *isn't* right. The problems we're stuck in now feel like a labyrinth. Perhaps war is the only way out."

"I don't believe that, Bennie. I never will."

Still the old idealism then, after so much time. With a sad, brittle smile, Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, "You should be going soon,

Leia. Whatever will come of this crisis, the Republic is going to need you to steer it through. As for me, I shall do my best to keep the peace here, in the place where everything started."

After her conversation with Han, Gavisom, and Behn-Kihl-Nahm, Leia felt a stronger sense of foreboding than ever. She didn't know if it was the Force talking to her or if it was just some innate sense of dread. Either way, she found it very hard to act confident as she left the Republic consulate and took a speeder over to the Prime Minister's tower to have one final talk with Jadesei Syne.

She found Syne where she expected to, in the high office overlooking Cephalia. The sun was starting to set; long afternoon shadows draped soft violent over the cityscape while slanting sunlight turned the white stone building-faces a dazzling shade of gold. As Leia walked in Syne was watching this beautiful sight, but whatever was in her heart, Leia couldn't tell. The woman seemed to be bottling up her emotions in the Force, and when Syne turned around to face her, she saw the same stiffness in the prime minister's face and posture.

"Prime Minister Syne," Leia said without moving closer. "I want you to know that I will be leaving Bavinyar immediately. There is a key vote in the New Republic Senate that I must be present for."

"I know," said Syne from behind her desk. "Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm sent me a message explaining that you'd be coming."

"I wanted to said goodbye in person. Gavisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm will be remaining here, along with their diplomatic staff, but I'm afraid I really am needed on Coruscant."

"You have nothing to apologize for." Syne leaned forward and planted white fists on her desktop. "You have your duty and I have mine."

Leia took a step forward. "I've enjoyed the chance to work with you the past few days. I hope that the current escalation hasn't damaged our relationship."

"The escalation is not your fault either. I know you've done everything you can to achieve a peaceful resolution to this conflict,"

Syne said, but her voice was still stiff. Leia tried to sense more from her in the Force, but gained nothing.

Folding her hands in front of her, Leia asked, "How do you plan to react to Palt-Ri-Gen's demands?"

"I'm the legitimate ruler of this planet," she said firmly. "I will not be stepping down and I will not bow to terrorism."

"I would never suggest that. Still, I will try and delay any intervention in your planet's affairs for as long as I can. It would help us both if you could tell me what your next plan of action is."

"For the moment? I will use the BDF to surround Leonal and jam transmissions coming from the island."

"What happens if Palt-Ri-Gen starts killing hostages?"

Syne snorted. "He calls them prisoners of war, not hostages."

"We all know that's what they are. So what do you plan to do about them?"

"I will not be the one to take the first life in this. But if Palt-Ri-Gen does begin killing, I *will* send the BDF in."

Leia swallowed. "You could very well end up taking the blame for whatever deaths happen on Leonal, even if the CPF is the one that kills them."

"I'm aware of that," Syne scowled, and Leia felt a strong spike of anger through the Force. "I am low on options, Princess. I don't see this crisis getting better before it gets worse, and I don't think your military will do anything to solve our problems either."

Leia didn't know what to say. This crisis has kept ramping up bit-by-bit, each time confounding her best efforts to tame it.

Syne's expression softened slightly. "I have one more question, Princess. I do not believe your NRDF can solve my problem. What about the Jedi?"

Leia blinked. "I have two Jedi here, though I was planning to take Kenth Hamner back with me to Coruscant."

"And your Bothan Jedi, is he staying here?"

"He's agreed to."

"I'll keep that in mind." Syne's brows drew together once again in angry concentration. "You may go now, Princess."

The coldness of the dismissal stung. Leia said, "I hope to see you again in better circumstances, Prime Minister Syne."

"And I, you, Princess." Syne nodded. "Goodbye."

That was it; the interview was over. Leia turned and walked out the door. Something- her gut or the Force- told her she'd never go through those doors, never see Jadesei Syne, again.

When Leia Organa Solo departed Bavinyar on her husband's ragged old freighter, it was General Kaice who brought the news to the prime minister's office. Syne had been pacing the whole time, watching darkness gradually fall on Cephalia. When Kaice arrived the lights in the towers were going up, drowning out the vivid blues and violets of the twilight sky.

His arm was out of its sling now, and both hands were balled into strong fists at his side as he stood in front of Syne's desk. "Madam Prime Minister, the time has come. Organa Solo is gone. We must act."

She took a deep, deep breath. She'd been dreading this conversation and had tried very hard to keep it from her mind while she and Organa Solo said their formal goodbyes. She didn't think the other woman had been able to sense her thoughts through the Force, but uncertainty gnawed at her, adding another layer of nervousness. She hadn't slept since the news from Leonal came down; right now she doubted if she ever would again.

"My people are standing by," Kaice pressed. "They will do this, if you give the order."

Syne sniffed. "Your captains are loyal, are they?"

"All of them, Madam. That's why they're captains in the first place. Every single ship in the BDF will stand against the Republic, if you tell them too."

"Making them stand against the Republic is a death sentence. I'm not sending our men and women to die to defend Bavinyar."

"You'll do it because it was what your mother did," Kaice said, "And because you'll have no other choice. Did Organa Solo promise you that she could prevent a New Republic intervention?"

Syne shook her head. "She was not so... optimistic."

"You see what I mean, then. This crisis has reached a breaking point. Someone needs to take charge and protect our world from anyone who might take it from us, whether it's Palt-Ri-Gen or the Republic. Please, Madam, be the woman your mother was, the woman I know you can be too."

She shook her head again, as though that could chase away the awful truth in Kaice's words. "You make it sound so damned easy, General. It's not."

"I know." He softened his tone. "But it's what we have to do. This is what history has given us. We have to act."

Syne closed her eyes, breathed in and out, and when she opened them Kaice was still looking at her with dark, pleading eyes.

"Has anything changed at the BSA?"

"Nothing since my last report. Korr-Mad-Narr has been pulling more and more personnel back to headquarters. Everything my informants tell me indicate that he's planning for action against you."

"Your informants," she echoed. "Tell me, General, have your informants said whether Korr-Mad-Narr was preparing for this all along? Have they been planning, just like your captains?"

Kaice's jaw dropped. "Madam President, I resent your implication! Korr-Mad-Narr is the one who's moving against you, not me. We have to move first. My people are standing by. The BDF is always loyal to you, even if the BSA is not."

"If I move against the BSA, General, the Cerean people will see it as a declaration of war against them."

"You don't need to cripple the entire BSA. Just send military police to arrest Korr-Mad-Narr and place someone in his stead. Not a human, another Cerean."

"I suppose you have suggestions?"

Kaice nodded. "His deputy, Bren-Far-Latt, is too much of a loyalist, but there are other possibilities. Sham-Vi-Diin, for example, the one heading the Pohl-Had-Narr investigation."

"A homicide police, in charge of the entire BSA? He'll be totally out of his depth."

"Exactly."

Syne scowled. "What do you know of his politics?"

"There seems to be very little to know. That's what makes him the ideal choice. Everything I've heard about him says he's a very competent, apolitically functionary."

"A functionary who's still failed to find whoever killed my predecessor."

"By putting him in charge of the BSA you can prove that you're serious about justice, no matter what Palt-Ri-Gen says."

The general's logic was a durasteel trap she felt herself closed in by. "And what about Korr-Mad-Narr? What reason do I have for arresting him and his top officers?"

"The truth. They were preparing a coup. You already saw all the evidence I gathered."

"You've offered evidence but no proof." She sighed. "I wish I could speak to *him* about that."

"That would show our hand. Please, Madam Prime Minister, give the declaration. We will arrest Korr-Mad-Narr and declare martial law."

"And the Republic?"

"If they're brave enough to defy us once they've seen our resolve, let them come," Kaice said darkly. "Bavinyari will be slaves to no one; no Empire, no Republic. No law but our own."

She saw in his eyes the fierce devotion she's so often heard ascribed to the mother she'd never met. She'd felt it too, when she was younger, when she'd first discovered her true parentage. And yet now, all Jadesei Syne felt was doubts upon doubts.

"Please, Madam," Kaice repeated. "You *must* give the order."

"Very well," she said at last, "Do it. Arrest Korr-Mad-Narr."

"Very good, Madam." Kaice straightened and snapped a salute. "I knew you'd never let us down."

He marched off to relay her orders, leaving her alone in her office as the last colors of twilight fled in the sky, leaving her with the beginning of what was sure to be a very long night. Strangely it felt like a little bit of pressure had lifted from her, even as she knew things were about to get so much worse so very soon.

As they crammed together in her hotel room, curtains drawn against the night, Asyr couldn't figure out which of them seemed the most nervous. Detective Ven was clearly concerned about having to come here at all; he hadn't explained the details of his last conversation with his Cerean partner in the BSA, but it sounded as though Bavinyar's police force was on the verge of some undetermined political crisis and he was trying without success to concentrate on the matter at hand in the hopes that catching Pedric Cuf, or Paven Lessex, or whoever they were looking for, would somehow calm a situation that was spiraling out of control.

And then there was this Rev Lessex person. The bare skin of his scalp gleamed with sweat in the light of Asyr's bedside lamp and one leg twitched up and down nervously as Ven slid the datacard he'd hastily copied at the port into her hotel room's holo-projector. He was clearly shaken by the day's events, adding another layer of anxiety over his existing desire to find his brother who had apparently, possibly, had a part in Pohl-Had-Narr's death.

Asyr would have frankly preferred that Lessex not come here at all, which was a big reason for her own anxiety. Just before Ven and this nervous civilian had arrived she'd gotten a comm from Tresk Im'nel, saying that President Organa Solo was going back to Coruscant but that he was staying behind with Gavrisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm, both of whom were trying to hold the New Republic's mission on this planet together and needed all the help they could get. She's reassured him with as much false confidence as she could muster that she had the situation well in hand and she and Ven were making fast progress.

It might have even been true, but right now Asyr had a hard time believing anything.

"Okay, here we go," Aryon Ven muttered as the holo-projector sprung to life.

He hopped back onto the bed along with Asyr and Lessex. The dark-skinned human leaned forward intently to examine the recording. It was clearly security camera footage, taken from above the entrance doorway to the broad landing pad on which the Corellian Action-model freighter had set down. Ven touched the

projector's controls and the camera zoomed in on a few figures standing in front of the massive ship's nose.

"There," Ven said after he'd zoomed in as far as he could go. "Tell me if you recognize any of these people, Mr. Lessex."

The other human squinted. Asyr watched closely too. Given the zoom level and the generally poor quality of security cameras, it was hard to tell anything for sure, but she didn't think any of the four humans standing and talking had skin tone dark enough to be Lessex's brother.

"Do you recognize any of them?" Ven prodded.

"I don't see Javen." Lessex didn't sound relieved. He kept concentrating as the recording played on. Another human appeared, this one pushing a repulsor-cart with several heavy crates on it. The other humans gathered around it and one of them, who seemed to have pale skin and dark hair, entered a keycode into the crate's lock and lifted up the lid halfway. Clearly he was the salesman, maybe Pedric Cuf himself, because the other three original humans all leaned in close to examine whatever was in the crate. From that angle, and with the holo-cam's poor resolution, there was no way to tell what was inside, but the crate certainly looked like it was about the right size and shape to fit a portable surface-to-surface missile launcher in.

"I'm still not sure about the others," Lessex muttered.

"Just wait," Ven said, and pressed a button on the controls.

The recording speeded up, and in fast-motion the crate was closed and locked and payments was exchanged. Then the three buyers took the repulsor-cart and began pushing it away from the freighter. Pedric Cuf, if that was he, turned and walked back to his ship. Ven hit another button and the recording slowed down, first to normal speed, then to one-half-normal.

Lessex and Asyr both leaned closer. The holo-cam was placed over the doorway and as the three men exited they passed close enough that their faces could be seen clearly. Ven froze the recording at the best point.

"Well," he asked, "Recognize any of them?"

"I think I might," Lessex nodded "That man, the one in the middle, pushing the cart. I saw him with my brother. I know it."

"That's good," Ven nodded eagerly. "Do you remember a name?"

"I... don't think so... Like I said, he never introduced these people to me. And wait... The one on the right. I think I recognize him too."

"And you think these are BIL people?" asked Asyr.

"I don't know who else they would be."

"Then the man they talked to must be Pedric Cuf."

"That sounds about right," Ven rubbed his chin. "If we can find these men they might lead us to Pedric Cuf."

"Or my brother," said Lessex.

"All of that is good," said Asyr, "But how do we track this? How do we find these people?"

Both she and Lessex looked to Ven. The young man gave a long, frustrated sigh, and said, "I can try and contact my partner, Detective Sham-Vi-Diin. He has more contacts inside BSA than I do. He's been around forever and knows everybody."

"I thought you said something is wrong at BSA head-quarter," Asyr said.

"I have no idea what's going on, but it sounded... ominous..."

"Then maybe we should try and talk to someone else," Lessex said, though he didn't seem to have any idea as to who.

"No," Ven insisted, "I'm going to try and call Sham-Vi-Diin again. He's our best shot. He might even know some of these people by sight, since he's been doing so much investigation into the BIL these days. Or he could take the recording to some prisoners and *they* could give us names."

"Are you sure it's safe?" asked Asyr. "Are you sure you can trust him?"

There was a too-long-second of hesitation before Ven nodded. "I can trust him."

"But is it *safe*?"

He took a deep breath and said, "I guess there's only one way to find out."

When his personal comlink started buzzing, Sham-Vi-Diin knew instantly that it was Aryon Ven. He assumed it would be another audio transmission, but instead he found that a data package had been sent to him. There was no explanation attached, so Sham-Vi-Diin plugged his comlink into his personal datapad to copy the files. That done, he stuffed his comlink into his breast pocket and turned on the datapad.

What he saw was simple enough at first glance. Security holocam footage, presumably from the main landing complex south of Cephalia, showed three men purchasing a crate-ful of merchandise from another man with a big Corellian Action-model freighter. As the recording got close to its end, the three buyers pushed their carts out through the exit, passing beneath the door, where their faces were visible for a few clear seconds. Sham-Vi-Diin had a feeling this was what Ven had wanted him to see, so he paused the recording and put his face nearly against the screen. He could make out the human faces clearly enough, but none of them were familiar. He wasn't sure if they were supposed to be.

Then, as though the young detective had known exactly how long it would take for him to review the files, his comlink started buzzing again. This time it was an audio transmission.

There was a click, then the human's voice. "Can we speak, sir?"

"I'm still in my office and my scrambler should be working. What did I just see, Detective?"

"That was what I just retrieved from the landing complex. I believe that freighter belonged to Pedric Cuf and I think that crate had the weapon used to kill Pohl-Had-Narr."

"Explain," Sham-Vi-Diin said in a terse whisper.

"It's a long story, sir, but after a short stop at Cephalia that same freighter hopped down to Leonal to let go of a bigger shipment." After a pregnant pause, Ven added, "I don't think I'll be getting *their* records any time soon."

"No, you won't," Sham-Vi-Diin snorted. "Am I supposed to recognize those three men?"

"I have reason to think they're connected with BIL. I figured you should see it. Even if you don't know those men, some of the

new prisoners could. You could ask them, or other people working to investigation BIL."

"I'm not in a position to go anywhere right now, Detective."

"What does that mean, sir?"

That was a very good question and the simple fact was that Sham-Vi-Diin had no idea what anything meant right now. So instead he said, "I was instructed not to leave the headquarters building. I'm not sure what that means. But.... Thank you, Detective. I'll do what I can from here. You keep doing what you can from there."

"Of course, sir."

"And stay safe, Ven. I think you're on to something. This could change everything." He dared himself to hope it. "You've done a fine job, Detective."

After a moment's pause, the young human said, "Thank you very much, sir."

Sham-Vi-Diin was going to add more, but he heard the sound of muffled footsteps, fast and crisp. They were the first outside sound he'd heard in hours since been sent down to his office and they sent his heart racing.

"I have to go now," he whispered into his comlink. "I'll talk later if I can. Goodbye, Detective."

He shut off the comlink and stuffed it into his jacket. He looked at his datapad, too, and pulled out its memory rod and put *that* in his pocket too, just as the door to his office opened.

He'd been expecting Korr-Mad-Narr, maybe, or one of his deputies. Instead he found himself staring at the brown uniform of the Bavinyar Defense Force.

That surprised him so much he didn't notice the face of the human in front of him, not until the man said, "We need you to come with us, Detective."

Sham-Vi-Diin blinked, stared. "Who are?"

"Major Alvar Brenner, BDF Central Division," the man said. "Come with me."

"To where?"

"General Kaice wants to speak with you immediately."

"Why? What happened to Korr-Mad-Narr?"

"He's just been placed under arrest for planning a coup against Prime Minister Syne. General Kaice believes you will be an appropriate replacement."

"Me? But I'm a..." He stopped. He knew what he was, and what he would be. A warm body, a reassuring face, a puppet for whatever Kaice and Syne were going to do to Bavinyar's government now that pressure from both the BSA and CPF had finally broken the long old pretense at cooperation between human and Cerean.

"Please, detective," said Brenner. "The general is waiting."

Sham-Vi-Diin nodded and rose from his chair. He kept his hands at his side, fighting the urge to reassuringly touch the comlink and data-rod in his jacket. Brenner turned and led the detective out of his office, and Sham-Vi-Diin kept his head low. He didn't want to look against at Brenner's face. He didn't want to be reminded that the man he was following now was the same one he'd just seen buying weapons from Pedric Cuf.

—CHAPTER TWELVE—

When Leia stepped into the New Republic Senate Chamber for the first time since before that ill-fated presidential debate two weeks ago, she was greeted by bedlam. Niuk Niuv was at the podium, trying to call everyone to order, but nobody seemed to be listened to the boisterous little Sullustan. Borsk Fey'lya stood behind his seat, hunched close in conversation with Porolo Miatamia. Celch Dravvad was glancing in aggravation at the mobile holo-cams they kept flitting around him while Pwoe looked downright dejected at his lack of attention. There was also a flurry of holo-cams around Elegos A'kla, who sat calmly in his seat his hand long-fingered hands folded in his lap, doing an admirable job of ignoring it all. As she stood in the entryway Leia had to scan the crowd a little more to spot her other reliable allies; Cal Omas, Avan Beruss, Tolik Yar, Trieebakk, and the others were all surrounded by their diplomatic staff having last-minute talks, though Avan did lift up his head and catch her eyes from the far side of the cavernous legislative chamber.

As for Leia, she'd been desperate trying to fend off advice from Nanaod Engh for the better part of the past hour, and even as she

got ready to step toward the podium her Chief of Staff wasn't ready to let her off the hook.

"I know the situation has gotten drastic, Madam President, but I still believe we can spin this to our advantage," her Chief of Staff was saying.

She gave him a reluctant sidelong glance. "What kind of advantage? Syne has declared martial law on Bavinyar. It's a complete defiance of the rule of law and the democratic charter of the New Republic."

"Yes, but we still have people on the ground," Engh insisted.

That they did; some diplomatic staff, one Jedi, and two of her most senior officials. She'd spoken with Bennie and Gavrisom after her arrival on Coruscant, where they'd reported that they were perfectly safe but under effective house arrest until further notice. It had all made Leia burn with shame; she'd felt a real personal bond with Jadesei Syne, and what's more, she should have been able to read the woman's intentions with the Force. Instead she'd let empathy blind her judgment and had ended up humiliated.

She couldn't even bring herself to think about what this all meant for the election, but as she looked out across the chamber again she saw that Borsk Fey'lya seemed to bristle with confidence. It was enough to make her sick.

"Borsk was right," she muttered under her breath. "All this damned time. He was right."

Engh stared. "Madam President... They're going to expect you to make a statement. What are you going to do?"

"The situation's changed, Nanaod. We have to change too."

That was when Miatamia moved to take his seat while Fey'lya went for the podium. Apparently that was what was needed to call the senate to order, because people finally seemed to notice that Niuk Niuv had been banging his gavel on the podium and calling for quiet for the past ten minutes.

"Madam President," Nanaod hissed, "If you were going to change policy I really wish you'd have told me more than five minutes before you make your speech!"

He was angry, and he was right to be angry, but Leia was too tired to care. She put a hand on his shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, Nanaod, but this is what I have to do."

"What about Fey'lya?"

"Let Borsk do what Borsk does," Leia said, though deep down she was dreading whatever was to come out of the Bothan's mouth.

Niuk Niuv took his seat as Fey'lya gripped the sides of the podium with both paws. Almost every single holo-cam floating in the arena clustered as close as it good, and Fey'lya did an admirable job of ignoring them. Even as their spot-lights shined in his creamy-furred face he pretended to look past them, at all the senators waiting for him to speak.

"That we are here today is a tragedy," Fey'lya began. "I wish I could say that we are blameless victims, but in truth, I hold now as I did two weeks ago that this criss on Bavinyar could have been handled better. I will not lay blame on my august colleagues, Ponc Gavisom and Behn-Kihl-Nahm, who even now are held as hostage by a hostile regime. No, they are victims in this, as much as the innocent Cerean civilians killed on Maressa, Shaldonia, and Lemurya in acts of brazen terrorism.

"I will only say this. All of those victims are victims because of New Republic policy based on the belief, noble but misguided, that the Bavinyar Independence League, Jadesei Syne, and the Bavinyar Defense Force can be reasoned with as rational political actors. They have by now proven themselves to be what I have said they are all along: a unified front advancing the agenda of radical human supremacy on Bavinyar."

That sent ripples through the crowd. Leia felt her heart sink as she saw so many non-humans senators bob their heads in agreement. Fey'lya went on, "Though they claim to detest the Empire, it seems as though the Bavinyari humans have learned well from their former oppressors. I know some in this august body might even find sympathy with them because of their history of being downtrodden by the Empire, but alas, so often the bullied becomes the bully, and a misguided sense of sympathy for these human supremacists has stayed our hand for too long and allowed

Syne and the BIL to seize control of Bavinyar's democratic institutions.

"Now we must say no more. Now we must stand up for the right of Cereans on Bavinyar, the rights of all species in a galaxy still tainted by the rotten hierarchies of the Empire. Today we will vote as we should have voted a week ago. We will vote to dismantle this system of lingering oppression on Bavinyar and anywhere else we can." The clamor of the crowd was rising again, and Fey'lya smacked a paw on the podium for emphasis. "We must vote now! We must vote in favor of military intervention, no matter the cost, because to do otherwise would be to betray our founding principles and leave one more system under the yoke of human supremacists!"

The senate's clamor seemed to near a breaking point. Fey'lya stepped back, satisfied, and tilted his head just enough to pass a sidelong look at Leia.

She knew that nothing she could have done would have kept the abject rage off her face.

"Madam President," Engh touched her shoulder, "We need to talk about your response. We can delay the vote, delay your speech-"

"No, Nanaod. We're doing this right now."

"But- But Leia! Wait!"

She pushed away from him and walked out across the long walkway toward the center dais where the ministers were seated. The senators, so loud a second ago, fell into a hush- awkward or reverential, she couldn't tell- as they watched her approach.

Fey'lya politely stepped aside when Leia reached the podium, avoiding eye contact as he settled down in his seat. Leia raised her head and looked out at the vast array of assembled senators, thousands of them. She'd addressed the senate too many times to count but it felt so different this time. She felt such a heavy weight on her shoulders, one she could only compare with what she'd felt when she told this august body that she planned to send troops into the Koornacht Cluster to stop the Yevetha. In that she'd not only been declaring war, she'd been drawing what she thought then was a straight line to her husband's death.

Now it was Bennie and Gavisom she stood to lose. Despite it, there seemed no other choice.

She said, "I have recently arrived from Bavinyar, where the situation has spiraled dangerously out of control in the short time I've been gone." She took a deep breath. "I have come here today to endorse Minister Fey'lya's call for military intervention in Bavinyar."

Chatter rose in the chamber. She spoke over it, loud and firm. "I do not make this decision lightly. As you know, I have been against military intervention thus far because I was afraid it would escalate a situation that could have been controlled. I believed that was the right choice then and I believe, still, that I made the right decisions at the time, based on the information available to me."

She swallowed, took a breath.

"However, these recent events cannot be excused and cannot be tolerated." She fixed her eyes on the holo-cams arrayed like a necklace of spotlights in front of her. "I say to Jadesei Syne, legal prime minister of Bavinyar, that you have taken illegal actions that defy the core principles of the New Republic. You still have a chance to rectify the situation and return power to civilian hands. If you have not taken steps to disarm the situation before New Republic forces arrive at Bavinyar, there will be consequences.

"I will also say that if any harm comes to New Republic government personnel presently on Bavinyar, those consequences will be severe. The New Republic does not bow to intimidation or to threats. The New Republic will do whatever it takes to preserve the rule of law and the success of democracy on all its member worlds.

"I urge Prime Minister Syne to remember what she sees here today. The future of your world is in your hands, as it has been since the start of this crisis. This is your last opportunity to chose wisely."

With that, Leia stepped away from the podium. The senate broke out into frenzied chatter again, but Leia hardly paid it attention. When she took her seat next to Behn-Kihl-Nahm's empty chair, she closed her eyes and felt all the energy drain from her.

She didn't know how long it took Niuk Niuv to calm the senators enough to actually hold the vote. She barely paid attention to the final tally and did not bother to see which way her allies and enemies voted. In the end, it didn't matter. The motion, Borsk Fey'lya's motion authorizing military intervention, passed with more than a two-thirds majority.

When the whole thing was done, Leia got up and left the senate chamber without a word. Nanaod Engh tried to corner her the moment she stepped out of view, but she had a secret weapon of her own. Her husband swooped in, interposing himself between Leia and her chief of staff, and hurried her down the back hallways to the senate chamber, into the private tunnels that connected the legislative building with the old Imperial Palace.

"That was brave, what you did in there," Han told her as he squeezed her shoulder.

"It wasn't brave. It was the only thing I could do."

"Well, it's what the Syne lady deserves, the way she played you."

"Han, she didn't play me." Leia stopped him in the middle of the empty corridor. She put both hands on his arms and said, "This wasn't like Nil Spaar. She was honestly conflicted."

"Yeah, well, look how her conflict ended up. I just hope she's not stupid enough to harm Bennie or Puffers."

"They have Tresk with them. A Jedi can keep them safe," Leia said, though she couldn't exactly believe it.

"I hope you're right, sweetheart." Han put his hands on her waist. "What are you going to do now?"

Leia gave a long, long sigh. "Something else I should have done when this whole mess started."

"Like what?"

"Han, Bavinyar has always buckled against authority. Those human settlers didn't even like the Old Republic. They came to that planet just to get away from anyone else's authority. It was stupid to just assume they'd buckle under it, especially after what the Empire did to them."

"Yeah, maybe." Han being Han, he still had a soft spot for rugged individualist types, so long as they didn't do anything to hurt his family, which these ones had. "What's your point?"

"Han, the Imperial admiral who put down the original Bavinyari revolt after the Clone Wars was Octavian Grant."

Han's face settled into a scowl. "You're going to Rathalay?"

"I think his perspective could be... valuable. Especially since we're heading for a military confrontation."

"Okay, maybe, but why you gotta go yourself? Why not send Jan Ors or one of the other spooks you have keeping an eye on him?"

"This is something I have to do in person, Han."

"How long has it been since you last saw him?"

"Not long enough," she shuddered slightly, "But I think I have to do it."

"Well, okay then. When are we going?"

Of course it would be we. Suppressing a tired smile, she said, "We'll take off before the end of the day. There's one more person I need to talk to first."

When the call came, Etahn A'baht was ready. Already in his general's uniform, he left immediately for Imperial Palace, and on arrival he was ushered up to the Chief of State's office.

The last time he'd come here had been at the start of the Bavinyar crisis, and even then some weary knowledge had settled in his gut that it might come to this. He found Leia Organa Solo seated behind her desk, hands clasped tight in front of her. He greeted her with a salute, and she bid him at easy with a tiny nod.

"Thank you for coming promptly, General."

"What are your orders, Madam?"

"I want you to take a naval contingent to Bavinyar. If Jadesei Syne does not release our personnel, relax the state of martial law, and present herself for negotiations, you are authorized to take military action."

"Action with what goal, Madam?"

"Removing Syne from office."

"And who, then, takes her place?"

"At the moment, I'd prefer to place Behn-Kihl-Nahm as temporary Prime Minister. If he is not able, I'm afraid we'll have to appoint you as military governor until a civilian power structure can be established."

"Madam, how large of a contingent am I authorized to bring?"

"As much as you need. I believe NRDF already has a full profile of the Bavinyar Defense Force's military capabilities. I hope you won't have to fight them all, but you must be prepared to."

"I understand that, Madam. A threat should never be made unless you're ready to follow through on it."

He wondered if he'd told her that during the Yevethan crisis. Jadesei Syne was not Nil Spaar and the Bavinyar crisis was a far different one, but in the end, it seemed like they'd both come to the same damned place in the end.

It was a grim thought; grimmer still was the idea of facing his former subordinate in combat.

"May I ask a question, Madam?"

"Go ahead."

"Should I attempt to meet personally with Syne before beginning military maneuvers?"

"I think you should." Organa Solo nodded. "Frankly, General, your past history with her is one of the reasons I chose you for this mission."

Another, he supposed, was that he was not human. Given the way Borsk Fey'lya had chosen to miscast this mess as a racial conflict in his senate speech- which was now dominating the news-nets- Organa Solo had a very careful political line to walk.

Everything about this mission made him sick. Worst of all was the fact that he'd known it was coming since he first met Organa Solo in this office two weeks ago.

"I'm going to leave the planning and execution of this mission to you," Organa Solo told him. "Given the peacetime status of the military, you should be able to muster whatever ships you need."

"I'll need time to decide. How long do I have?"

"I'm afraid I can't spare more than a day with this. There's no telling how much worse the situation on Bavinyar will get. We can't afford to wait any more.

He'd been expecting that, just as he'd been expecting this job, which was why he could say, "I'll have my preliminary plan on your desk by the end of the day."

"I appreciate that, General, but please give your report to Minister Miatamia. He'll relay it to me. I'll do my best to review it, but I trust your judgment."

"Are you going to be going somewhere, Madam?"

"I'll be leaving Coruscant within two hours."

"To Bavinyar?"

"No," she shook her head gravely. "I'm leaving that in your capable hands. I'll be going to Rathalay."

A'baht fought a frown; Rathalay was out-of-the-way and mostly known as a low-key vacation planet.

Then he remembered.

"Ah. Grand Admiral Grant."

"The same. I'd ask you to come with me, but we don't have the time for it."

"Please fill me in on any... recommendations you can glean from Grant."

She nodded, very grave. "I will, General. I will."

In the aftermath of the senate vote, the Chief of State had made herself nearly impossible to track down. She was- understandably- hiding from the clamoring press, but even, it seemed from her own staff as well. After failing to harangue her location from Nanaod Eng, Avan Beruss finally turned to his wife, who contacted some of her co-workers in NRDF and ascertained that Leia had slipped into her office and summoned Etahn A'baht for a high-level meeting.

Avan knew she'd turn away any more callers at her office, but he detached a member of his security detail to keep him informed of the Chief of State's movements. As soon as A'baht left, Leia was in motion again, this time heading down to one of the secure hangar

bays used by Senators for private access to the government complex.

Avan made his way to the hangar complex as fast as he could, and he was just barely able to intercept Leia before she boarded a sleek, anonymous shuttlecraft that would take her off-planet.

"Princess!" he called, walking briskly across the landing pad as her guards moved to intercept.

Leia paused at the base of the boarding ramp, then sighed and said, "Let him approach. It's all right."

Avan slipped through her guards and trotted up to her. "Princess," he said, "I want you to know that I cast a vote in favor of intervention, like you said, but—"

A sad smile set on her face. "You were taken by surprise, were you?"

"All of us were," Avan said. "Senator Omas was confused. So was Triebaak. Tolik Yar was angry—"

"Tolik's always angry," Leia said, still smiling, still sad. "What about Elegos?"

Avan sighed. "Senator A'kla... Is too hard to read."

Leia laughed without pleasure. "I'm sure it's not what he wanted either, but Elegos can take any disappointment with aplomb."

Avan stared into her sad eyes and wished he knew what to say. He'd known Leia since they were both children, and while they weren't as close now as they'd been back when she'd played in the Beruss family estate, he still felt crushed by the feeling that he'd let down a close friend when she'd needed it the most.

He'd planned on asking her, with restrained anger, why she'd decided to reverse her position; of course, the answer was clear, and as he looked in her eyes he realized there was no point in raising the question.

So instead he said, "What should we do now?"

He could see in her eyes she understood. We meant all her allies, everyone in the Senate who'd resisted Fey'lya's attempts to cast himself as some political savior. And by now he meant everything going forward: after the Bavinyar crisis was over, after

the election, after the galaxy had moved into a new and frightening place with Fey'lya at its helm.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "We have to keep doing what we've been doing all along, Avan. We have to believe in democracy. We have to believe in the Republic and all it stands for, no matter how hard it can be. And we have to believe we're not alone."

In her eyes, in her voice, he knew she was struggling to believe that as much as he was. And he knew that belief was the only thing either of them had left.

"Where are you going now, Leia?"

She seemed to hesitate, undecided not on whether to tell him but on how to phrase it. Finally, she said, "I'm going to ask for advice on how to solve the Bavinyar crisis."

"From whom?"

"Someone I'd really rather not talk to. Don't worry about me, Avan. This won't be a long trip. And I'll be back... before the end."

She pulled him close and wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a tight hug. Then she joined her guards and marching up the ramp. Avan retreated to the edge of the landing pad and stayed there to watch her shuttle rise on gusts of warm air and sail away into the red gleam of a waning Coruscant day. He traced her ship's glowing thrust-trail as it receded to nothing. She said she'd be coming back and he believed her, but he knew, deep down, that the Republic would never be blessed with her wise leadership again.

Somehow, some way, he'd have to survive without her.

—CHAPTER THIRTEEN—

When the so-called 'Last Grand Admiral' of the Galactic Empire had surrendered to the New Republic, he hadn't really been working for the Empire at all. Octavian Grant had been aligned with the splinter faction called the Pentastar Alignment, a huge chunk of the Outer Rim under Grand Moff Arduus Kaine, successor to Wilhuff Tarkin. Kaine had run the administrative side to the Alignment while Grant had managed its navy from the bridge of Kaine's super star destroyer *Reaper*. Unlike other Imperial warlords like Zsinj or Teradoc, Kaine had seemed content to hold his existing territory and avoid fights with either other ex-Imperials or the New Republic, and for that reason he and Grant had initially been left alone.

That had changed after the Fall of Coruscant. With Ysanne Isard gone and the capital world in its hands, the New Republic had reshifted its focus to taking out the various Imperial warlords in the Outer Rim. Grant, sensing that his time was running out, had offered to surrender to the New Republic, exchanging all his knowledge and secrets for comfortable house arrest on a world of

his choosing. Mon Mothma had been in charge then, and she'd chosen to accept the offer with little hesitation.

Leia wished her mentor was alive now, but the woman had died peacefully two years before. She'd always been ambivalent about the decision to give Grant amnesty; displays of mercy were a virtue, both morally and politically, yet Leia had a hard time forgiving Grant for the crimes he'd committed. Even now, after almost two decades on Rathalay, the old grand admiral seemed glibly unrepentant of all he'd done.

Leia met him where she always did. It had been years since she'd last had any reason to speak with Grant but it seemed like nothing had changed. The grand admiral's villa was located on a hillside overlooking a white beach and vivid blue ocean. The air was warm and fragrant, and Grant's servant droid escorted her onto a large balcony where palm-leafed trees swayed in the breeze and water played through a series of shallow ornamental pools. Beyond the white-stone railing, one could see surf gently beat the shoreline. There were no people in sight, no houses. The estate was in perfect seclusion.

This kind of life would cost a fortune on Coruscant. Space was vastly cheaper on Rathalay, but Leia still fought down indignation that New Republic taxpayers' money was being spent on keeping Grant pampered.

She was kept waiting for almost ten minutes before the door back into the house slid open. She turned from the ocean view to see the last grand admiral shuffle onto the balcony. Grant had never been a big man and his short, thin frame seemed withered with age, though if he used a cane he refused to give Leia the satisfaction of seeing him with it. White hair topped a lined, sagging face, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of Leia.

"Well," Grant said after a moment, "It's been quite some time, hasn't it, Princess?"

"That it has." Leia folded her hands politely in front of her. "You seem to be doing well."

"As well as can be expected," Grant grunted. Despite his age his voice was still strong, and he spoke with the crisp aristocratic accent

ubiquitous in the old Imperial court. Just hearing it took Leia back decades.

Grant walked over to the railing beside her and leaned bony elbows against it. "I know you dislike small talk, Princess, so I won't try to keep you long. You're here about Bavinyar, aren't you?"

"You've been following the news."

"Of course I've been following the news. What the devil else can I do?" Grant waved a withered hand at the beautiful ocean view, as though it were some junkyard on Ord Mantell.

"I understand you had a hand in the subjugation of Bavinyar forty years ago."

"Forty years...." His eyes narrowed. "What a thought that is... Sometimes it feels like a century, other times... yesterday."

Leia didn't have patience for him to get wistful. "Tell me, Mr. Grant, did you ever face Jereveth Syne in battle?"

His face creased in annoyance; either for some bad memory or for Leia's refusal to call him 'grand admiral.' She hoped both.

"I did," he said finally. "It was after the Clone Wars. Her whole planet resisted the Emperor's New Order, quite fiercely for such a small population. They had... four dreadnaughts to defend their home with. Naturally, I had more ships."

He gave Leia a cruel smirk. "She was a little like you, Princess. Her father was Bavinyar's leader. Jereveth Syne was young, no more than thirty, when I conquered her planet and killed her father. But even without her world or her daddy, the little waif kept fighting."

"I'm sure you left her no choice," Leia said coolly.

"You're right. I didn't. She only had... Yes, she only had two dreadnaughts and some support ships, but she harassed my sector fleet for months. She always attacked with fast hit-and-run raids, the kind you Rebels would take up decades later."

"Jereveth Syne was an inspiration to the Alliance," Leia said.

Grant snickered. "Irony, then, that her daughter's giving you so much trouble now, eh? The Bavinyari never had love for anybody else's government. You shouldn't be surprised they're not happy to share their world with alien trash at the point of a Rebel gun."

"Did you defeat Jereveth Syne?"

"Oh, yes," Grant's smile turned soft, almost wistful. "That was quite a fight, you know. I trapped her fleet and she had no way out, but she fought to the very last ship. She fought so hard she nearly ground *my* forces to nothing. But I got her in the end, and with her the last shred of Bavinyari resistance. After that we resettled their world with Cereans to make sure all the exiles Syne led off the planet never came back. It would be decades before you Rebels mustered a fighting force to take on an Imperial fleet like they could. Yes, those Bavinyari... They were the last of a dying breed. Or first of a new. Hah."

"How did you defeat Syne, then? You just ground her into nothing?"

"Well, it was more than that." The smile got tighter, crueler. "She knew I was the one who destroyed her father's ship. She let the desire for vengeance against me make her sloppy. She let it get personal."

"And I suppose you didn't?" Leia said with distaste.

To her surprise, Grant laughed. "Oh, no, dear girl, I let it get *very* personal. Jereveth Syne nearly cost me my career. I won because I was a better tactician, simple as that."

"Of course."

Grant held up a bony finger. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not denigrating the little waif. I faced many enemies in the Empire's name, but Jereveth Syne... Ah, *that* was an opponent. Resourceful, unpredictable, and *fierce*. She was a *challenge*. I'm very proud to have killed her."

"I'm sure her daughter would be overjoyed to know that."

"Ah, yes, the daughter. What was her name again? Something with another 'J'."

"Jadesei."

"Yes, of course. Well, if she's anything like her mother, she can be beaten the same way."

The hungry look in her eyes sent a chill down Leia's spine. "What are you saying, Mr. Grant?"

The old man leaned closer. "I know you authorized military intervention in Bavinyar. Let *me* lead it, Princess. Syne thinks I'm a

monster, they all do. My very presence will sow confusion and chaos in their ranks!"

Leia took a step away from him. The old man was simply delusional if she thought she'd ever put an Imperial war criminal, the last grand admiral of all things, in charge of a New Republic battle group, especially one who'd already subjugated that planet before on Palpatine's orders. She remembered how, according to Mon Mothma, Grant had also begged her to give him a fleet to fight Grand Admiral Thrawn. The old man must have become desperate for his old warrior days after so long in captivity.

Strangely, the thought made Leia feel a little better.

As politely as she could, she said, "I am trying to reach a solution that involves as little violence as possible."

Grant snorted and waved a hand. "Violence is the only thing the Bavinyari understand. They're an uncivilized, frontier people at their core, Princess. The kind of noble upbringing we had is totally alien to them."

"If we kill Syne we only make a martyr of her. It will only cut resentment of the New Republic deeper into Bavinyari society."

"You Rebels," Grant sneered, "Always seeking compromise and consensus. This is *your* galaxy now. You rule a vast collection of human and alien systems under one unified law. That makes you an empire whether you think of yourselves as one or not. And every empire rules by the same principle. Either take control or lose control."

"And what would *you* suggest we do, *Mr.* Grant?" Leia asked sarcastically.

Grant noticed her tone but chose to ignore it. "Either kill Syne, or take her prisoner and put her on trial for breaking some law or another. Dismantle the human military and replace it with one of your own fleets. Anyone even suspected of working with the human or Cerean separatists must be rounded up and executed."

"Rule by fear. That didn't work well for Tarkin."

"Tarkin trusted his monstrosity of a space station to save him. That was the flaw that killed him. You're different. You have to trust

the same thing every empire and every galactic government has before yours: The cold fist of the law."

Leia looked away, pointedly toward the calm pulse of water against sand far below.

"You don't want to hear it," Grant said, "But you'll see it soon enough. It's what will happen whether you want it to or not. Such is the way of the universe."

Leia felt like screaming, less at Grant and more at herself for thinking she might even get anything useful from this wretched man.

As though he sensed her thoughts, Grant said with a defensive tone, "The galaxy is what it is, Princess, not what we want it to be. I'm surprised you haven't learned that by now. Well. Perhaps your Bothan successor will be more prudent."

Leia glared at him. "The election is still weeks away."

"After this debacle, Princess, the result is a foregone conclusion," Grant shrugged. "Your trusted candidate is a prisoner on his own homeworld, which is hardly a recommendation for his competence. Still, I'm not looking forward to seeing Fey'lya in charge. The crafty alien reminds me far too much of some schemers I knew in Palpatine's court."

Leia looked down at her hands as they gripped the stone railing. Grant was right about that and she knew it, though she'd been trying desperately not to think about it. Nothing that would follow on Bavinyar was certain, but she could hardly see any resolution that would end with Bennie winning the coming election instead of Fey'lya. The Bothan had simply played his hand better.

She felt guilty for even thinking of the crisis in political terms, but it was a reality she had to deal with. Fey'lya winning control of the New Republic, unthinkable just a month ago, now seemed inevitable, and part of her felt that preventing that was even more important than finding the least violent solution to the Bavinyar conflict.

Maybe, she thought, there was a way those two could be one.

She looked back up at Grant. "I was told that Jereveth Syne had a Jedi Knight in her force. Perhaps more than one. Can you say anything about that?"

Grant's eyes went distant as he peered back through the years. "Yes, I believe she was involved with the Jedi. Not that it saved her in the end of course."

"Of course," Leia echoed sourly.

"Still," he admitted, "I believe those Jedi did help her. They were part of her... advantage in some of our encounters. Of course, by that time, the Jedi cult was already under an extermination order. I'm sure they all died, in the end."

"*Those* Jedi might be dead," Leia said, "But the Jedi are very much alive."

"So I've been told," Grant said with a bitter smile. "I remember that Order before it was exterminated, you know. Nowadays you hear about how enlightened the Jedi are, how noble and brave and righteous. Let me tell you, Princess, I was not the only one relieved to see that band of religious fanatics wiped out. Far from it. No sane government would ever trust a powerful organization working in separate parallel to the established state, accountable only to themselves. The Jedi were antithetical to the rule of law; anyone could see they had to be eliminated."

"I trust the Jedi. Implicitly."

"I know, I know. You have... family ties. You may think your beloved brother can keep them all in check, but be warned, Princess. The Jedi are on no one's side but their own."

"I really must be going," Leia said and turned for the door, "But thank you for your advice. You've honestly given me something to think about."

Not what he'd meant for her to think about, but he honestly had.

They'd reached the point where no one was even trying to pretend that Sham-Vi-Diin was anything more than a prisoner. A prisoner they treated with courtesy, perhaps, but still a prisoner. BDF soldiers had occupied the entrance to BSA headquarters and strictly

controlled exit and entry from its premises. Sham-Vi-Diin himself could go no place without being escorted by at least two of Major Brenner's human security officers.

They did show him the small favor of escorting him up into the Prime Minister's tower, if a favor it was. The data-rod with the recording of Brenner buying weapons, presumably from Pedric Cuf, presumably used to murder Pohl-Had-Narr, was like a heavy weight in his pocket. He kept on telling himself that if he could find some way to speak privately with Prime Minister Syne he could show her the recording and explain what it meant, and she would take the proper course of action.

There was no logical reason to think it. He had no way to prove anything he could tell her about the recording, and even if he could, there was no way to now whether Syne hadn't organized Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination herself. When the assassination first took place, there had been a lot of talk about how convenient it was that Syne was standing by to fill his office. Sham-Vi-Diin's gut instinct had been that Syne was reasonable and moderate and would never willingly condone such an action, though the BIL could have been using her as a tool. If he proved to her now that she was being used, he might, just might, stir her to shake off the forces within the BDF who were manipulating her.

It was all incredible long shot. Still, when they brought him up into the tower, he allowed himself the stupid hope.

He was reminded just how stupid his dream was when his guards escorted him into an oblong briefing room. Syne was at the far side of the table, talking with Major Brenner and General Kaice. As his guards directed him to a seat closer to the door, Syne's eyes met his from across the room.

"Director Sham-Vi-Diin," she said, disengaging from the two military men, "I'm glad you could make it. Have you been treated well?"

Sham-Vi-Diin looked around the room, at all those hard human faces set over brown uniforms. He was the only Cerean in the room, and they'd clearly brought him in to witness some kind of military operation.

He forced himself to look Syne in the eye. "Sufficiently well, Prime Minister."

"I'm glad," Syne said, and she even sounded honest. "I want to offer my personal apologies for all you've been through. I did not want to act, but I received clear and pressing evidence that Korr-Mad-Narr was going to take steps to subvert the elected authorities and remove me from office."

Sham-Vi-Diin nodded. It was hard to deny when he'd seen evidence of that himself. "I have to say, Madam Prime Minister, that I never imagined I would ever be made director of the BSA."

"When martial law is lifted, and I promise it will be, there will be a reorganizing of the BSA," Syne told him. "I promise we will find an appropriate place for you then."

Acutely aware of a dozen human eyes peering at him, Sham-Vi-Diin dared to ask, "Do you have any idea *when* martial law will be lifted?"

Syne looked away from him, passing her gaze around the officers at the table. "Very soon, I hope. You may or may not have heard, but the New Republic has authorized the use of military force to restore civilian rule on Bavinyar."

Sham-Vi-Diin hadn't heard. His courteous captors hadn't let him hear anything at all. "What about Republic personnel on the planet?"

"They're being kept safe and will remain safe," Syne assured him. "I'm hoping, in fact, to present them to the New Republic fleet when it arrives, along with the cessation of martial law."

That all sounded too good to be true. "I'm glad to hear it, Madam. This meeting I've been brought to, does this have anything to do with it?"

"It does. The BDF is about to launch an operation to recover Leonal from Palt-Ri-Gen and the CPF. As acting head of the BSA, it's only appropriate that you're here to witness the event."

Sham-Vi-Diin looked around the room, at all those hard human faces. "I'm... honored to be here, Madam."

From the far end of the table, General Kaice said, "Madam Prime Minister, our teams are in place. We're ready to begin the operation as soon as you are."

Syne took a deep, deep breath. Sham-Vi-Diin could see the gravity settle over her. "Very well, General. Tell them to begin."

She left Sham-Vi-Diin to sit at the far end of the table, between Brenner and Kaice. Sham-Vi-Diin was left stranded between two human officers he'd never met as the holo-projector in the center of the room sprung to life, revealing a strategic representation of the mining complex at Leonal. General Kaice stood up and began a short briefing, pointing out the red markers identifying reported CPF weapon emplacements on the complex exterior and the green markers identifying the BDF units that had been stationed on all sides of the complex.

As soon as he finished giving instructions, the troops went on the move. An audio transmission, crackling with static, filled the room as someone who identified himself as Major Hallex started narrating the BDF's attack on the facility.

"HQ, we are moving in teams Alpha, Gamma, and Delta right now. Teams Beta, Lambda, and Sigma are standing back for a second wave."

Sham-Vi-Diin watched, only half-understanding, as markers on the holo-map began to move. Green BDF units seemed to approach from the north and south, while a third unit seemed to fall in from above.

"Team Alpha is approaching via air now," Major Hallex reported. "They'll provide cover for Teams Gamma and Delta."

Sham-Vi-Diin thought he could make out the rattle of weapons-fire in the transmission's background. He glanced away from the holo to the far end of the table. Prime Minister Syne seemed to be watching the battle's progress intensely, but Kaice and Brenner were leaning over her back, whispering something.

"Team Alpha is in position, delivering covering fire," Hallex went on, "Delta is approaching the west entrance. They're encountering resistance... Alpha is moving to clear heavy defenses..."

There was suddenly a loud sound-burst over the transmission, and Sham-Vi-Diin wasn't the only one who half-jumped from his chair in surprise. He watched as the markers denoting Delta and Alpha began to flicker.

He had a feeling that was a bad sign.

"Team Alpha has taking heavy damage," a breathless Major Hallex updated. "Repeat, heavy anti-aircraft fire. Looks like Imperial shoulder-mounted weapons... They're... *Oh*. Oh, no."

Kaice leaned forward. "Major, report! Now!"

"I'm sorry, General, but two of our air units have just been shot down. And the CPF... They've just activated a series of stealth mines. They've... They've brought down part of the mountain."

Sham-Vi-Diin looked at the holo again. Only one marker for Team Alpha was left while the remaining Delta ones were still flickering.

"Tell Delta to fall back," Kaice ordered. "Have Alpha pull around. See if they can't at least get Gamma in through the east entrance."

"Yes, sir. Will comply."

The officers around Sham-Vi-Diin tensed and sucked in breath; clearly this was not going as they'd hoped. The markers for Delta group kept flashing until they suddenly stopped entirely. One officer slammed an angry fist on the table, answering any question as to what they meant.

"Major Hallex, report," Kaice said with a scowl.

"I'm sorry, General, but we've lost Delta. They attempted to flee and got caught by suppression fire."

"What about Gamma?"

"Gamma has... breached the east entrance. Teams are heading into the facility now."

"What about the air support?"

"Alpha is standing over the facility now, sir, but I can't say how long it will take them to realign their anti-air."

"Pull Alpha out for now. Can you muster more air forces for retrieval if Gamma needs it?"

"Yes, sir, we can pull in Team Sigma."

"Good. Keep us updated on Gamma."

Kaice leaned back in his chair and told Syne, "We can still hold this, Madam. The question is how much the CDF is defending *inside* the facility."

"The other question is whether they'll start executing hostages," Syne grimaced.

"If Palt-Ri-Gen does, he knows his life and organization are dead too," Brenner insisted.

"He probably thought that anyway once we declared martial law," Syne retorted. She was clearly chafing under the pressure, and the new rules that had brought them. Sham-Vi-Diin allowed himself another spike of stupid hope.

He looked at the holo-projection again. It showed the small green dots marking Gamma Team scattering into the superstructure; apparently the soldiers had track-ing devices on them, but there seemed to be no way of locating enemy soldiers within the same facility.

As one long minute dragged into the other, Kaice said, "That complex is a massive maze. It will take the better part of a day to fully clear it, even without hostiles at every turn."

"We need to recover those hostages," Syne said.

"I know, Madam, but if Palt-Ri-Gen damages the mining machinery, the economic cost will be significant also."

"Hostages first, then the machines."

Kaice nodded, almost grudgingly. Sham-Vi-Diin looked back at the holo; nothing seemed to have changed and Major Hallex was sending no more updates. After two more long minutes, even Kaice seemed to lose his patience.

"Major," he said, "What is our update?"

A deep breath rasped over the comm. "Sir, reports from Team Gamma are spotty and, ah contradictory."

Have they secured stages of the mining facility?"

"Yes, sir. They seemed to have cleared the top four levels, but as you know, the facility goes much, much deeper, another twenty levels."

"What about the hostages, Major?" asked Syne.

"We've, ah... That's the contradictory part, Madam. I've gotten reports that the CPF is dragging some hostages deeper underground with them."

"What about the *others*, Major?"

Another labored, rasping breath. "We're finding bodies. They appear to be hostages from the mining staff."

Syne swore. Kaice asked, "How many bodies, Major?"

"At the moment... Ah.... Upward of twenty. Maybe closer to fifty. We've found a few rooms where it's hard to count."

Sham-Vi-Diin's gut lurched. The officers looked at each other in disgust and consternation. Kaice asked, "Has there been any attempt to repulse the teams on the upper floors?"

"Not that I can tell, sir. It seems like the enemy is setting down for a siege. They've already collapsed some tunnels. The remaining paths deeper into the mines are heavily guarded."

"Major, have your people hold position," Syne said, and pressed a button muting the transmission.

Sham-Vi-Diin watched, as helpless as all the human military brass around him, as Kaice and Syne turned from the table and spoke in harsh but inaudible voices. Major Brenner looked awkwardly on as the two talked for that seemed like five minutes. Finally, both Syne and Kaice turned back to the table, looking as close to calm and composed that any being could be expected to look given the circumstances.

Kaice switched the audio back on and said, "Major Hallex, are you there?"

"Standing by, sir."

"Your troops are to hold you advance on the facility. Secure the floors you've taken and make sure it's safe to bring in more aerial teams. Start tallying casualties and preparing bodies for transport."

"Yes, sir."

"And Major," Kaice added, "Have you any clue as to Palt-Ri-Gen's whereabouts?"

"I'm afraid not sir. We have a few Cerean casualties but none of them look like him."

"We'll assuming he's digging deeper. Thank you, Major. We'll contact you in two hours with further instructions."

"Yes, sir."

He shut off the link, and with it the holo-projection. The entire room seemed to release a nervous sigh, Sham-Vi-Diin included.

Relief lasted only a moment. The battle had clearly not gone as plan, and Syne probably was not going to get Leonal secured before the New Republic showed up. As to what that meant, Sham-Vi-Diin wasn't sure, but he couldn't imagine it was anything good.

Kaice rose from his seat. "All right, back to your posts, everyone. We'll keep you informed."

He didn't even bother to look in Sham-Vi-Diin's direction. The Cerean's guards stepped up on either side of him, as though daring him to try and run some place else.

He didn't run, but he did stand, take a deep breath, and call, "Madam Prime Minister, can I have a word with you?"

Syne, already engaged in conversation with Kaice, called back, "I'm sorry, Director, but at the moment I have more pressing concerns."

She really didn't. Sham-Vi-Diin was about to insist again when Brenner waved a hand. "Take him back to his office. Director, we'll call on you when we need you."

He opened his mouth in protest, not knowing what he'd say. It didn't matter. His guards, his captors, took him by shoulders, nearly dragging him backwards out of the chamber. He was left to face Syne and her traitors as the chamber doors slid shut, obscuring them from view.

The New Republic officials staying at the consulate had found themselves under house arrest before any of them knew what was going on. The servant droid had almost finished preparing dinner for Behn-Kihl-Nahm, Gavrisom, and Tresk Im'nel when the Bothan Jedi started behaving strangely distracted. Behn-Kihl-Nahm had little first-hand experience with Jedi, but that was enough to make him feel spooked.

When asked, Im'nel said he felt a vague disturbance in the Force; the sensation that something was happening somewhere else in the city. Not violence, he clarified, but something to cause a great deal of stress and alarm.

Gavrisom had offered to pass a call to BSA headquarters. The link failed to go through, which made Behn-Kihl-Nahm even more alarmed. Before he could do anything else, armored BDF landspeeders arrived at the gate to the consulate.

Little had happened after that, at least little the New Republic staff was aware of. The BDF officer who marched into the consulate never bothered to give his name; he simply said that the building was on lock-down and they would be told when they were permitted to leave. He hadn't bothered to tell them that all communication lines outside the consulate had been cut; so, too, had any means of viewing the news-nets and gleaning information that way.

They managed to pass days in anxious speculation, dread settling all the while in Behn-Kihl-Nahm's gut. It was more clear than ever now that he'd allowed himself to be hopelessly outplayed by the human extremists on Bavinyar. He tried not to even think about the political repercussion for the New Republic election. After this debacle he didn't deserve his senate seat, let alone the Chief of State's office. He tried to focus on what he could do for Bavinyar but with no way to contact the outside world, there was little he could do there either. Im'nel tried repeatedly to find way around the communications block, only to declare that the BDF must have erected a powerful localized dampening field around the consulate grounds. Once the Bothan went and spoke to the well-armed guards outside and tried to use some Jedi mind tricks on them, but that proved futile as well.

All the while, no one from the BDF came to explain their situation. They were trapped in maddening isolation.

When they finally got a visitor from the outside, it was the last person Behn-Kihl-Nahm least expected to see. Escorted by a half-dozen BDF men in riot armor, Jadesei Syne walked through their front door and politely asked if she could sit down.

She explained, in brief, the situation: the planned coup by Korr-Mad-Narr and the BDF preemptive strike against him, the stalled and costly attempt to retake the mining facility at Leonal from Palt-Ri-Gen, and the New Republic task force that had been authorized by the senate to restore civil order on Bavinyar.

When she was all done, Tresk Im'nel bore his angry Bothan fangs and said, "Your local defense fleet will never be able to hold off the Republic navy. For your sake you'd better plan a surrender."

Syne shook her head "I will not step down from this office, not until we've restored peace on Bavinyar our-selves."

"What kind of peace?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm asked. "You say you want to capture or kill Palt-Ri-Gen and dismantle the CPF."

"I do. Will you defend their actions, Senator?"

"Definitely not. Will you defend the BIL's?"

Syne flinched. "I've put great effort into tracking the people responsible for the recent terrorist attacks, no matter what Palt-Ri-Gen says."

"You've captured rogue cell leaders. I commend that. But what about Aviran Kolin?"

"Kolin has been... Harder to locate."

"What about the people responsible for killing Pohl-Had-Narr, the ones who started this crisis in the first place?"

"That investigation has stalled. I admit that. I only have limited personnel and this crisis keeps spiraling further out of control," Syne said defensively.

Gavrisom made a whinnying noise and shook his feathered mane. "Madam Prime Minister, I still believe you are an honorable woman."

She took the compliment with an arched eyebrow. "However?"

"However, your insistence on solving this problem through the strong hand of the military- the overwhelming *human* military- is counterproductive. The New Republic is here to help you, as it always has been. Do not turn down our aid."

"What *aid*? A war fleet over Bavinyar is not help, it's an invasion force"

"I know you've had your problems before," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, "But the Republic is no the Empire. We're not here to take away your sovereignty. We're try to promote the peaceful cooperation between all peoples of the galaxy."

"Peaceful cooperation?" Syne snorted. "Frankly, Senator, that sounds like a euphemism to convince the weak that the strong have their interests at heart. I'm not trusting it."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm was beginning to suspect Syne trusted no one at all, not even herself. "I do not believe the Republic will accept your point of view. Nor would any Cerean on this planet, nor, I think, many humans."

"And now your enlightened Republic comes to *make* me accept their benevolence at the point of a gun." She shook her head. "The task force will be here in less than six hours. I am going to try and stall them, at least until Leonal is pacified. To do that, I plan to release most of the consulate's support staff. And one of you."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm looked around the room. "Are you asking us to *choose*?"

"I am. As a show of good faith. We will defend our sovereignty if attacked, but we will not fire the first shot. I want your Republic to know that."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm, Gavrisom, and Im'nel exchanged long, wordless glances. Syne added, "I can give you five minutes in private to discuss the matter."

"I will stay," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said immediately. "My place is here, on Bavinyar. I won't abandon my home."

Syne nodded, like she'd expected that.

Im'nel raised a paw. "I'll volunteer to stay as well. I want it never to be said that a Jedi fled from a place of danger, not while others remained at risk."

Gavrisom gave a whistling sigh. "Your bravery humbles me. I would stay as well."

"One of you will be released," Syne said. "If you can't decide, I'll pick one myself."

"Minister Gavrisom, you should go," said Im'nel. "You can still find a diplomatic solution to this mess. Besides, you have the least at stake here."

"Very well," Gavrisom's head bobbed heavily on his long neck. "I will shepherd the rest of the diplomatic staff to safety."

"No harm will come to here in the consulate either," Syne said firmly. "I guarantee that to you. We are not butchers."

"We appreciate your assurance, Madam," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said weakly.

Syne rose to her feet. "Tell your people to prepare to evacuate all their belongings. My people will be here in four hours to take everyone away."

"Except those who choose to stay," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said.

"Yes," she nodded. "Except those who choose."

Asyr Sei'lar was about ready to smash through the windows of her hotel and leap out. She hadn't left her room since the start of martial law, and had spent most of her time cooped up with both Aryon Ven and Rev Lessex. Both humans had dared go out into the street at times, to pick up food and scout the area, and both reported that Cephalia was a ghost city. There weren't many BDF officers patrolling the streets, but the ones they did see were given wide berths. Everyone was locked inside and frightened, awaiting whatever was coming.

The news-nets had been allowed to speak with surprising freedom at first, though once it was reported that the New Republic Senate had authorized military force to settle the Bavinyar crisis, most had been abruptly shut down, leaving Asyr to feel more isolated on this alien world than ever.

"We still have this recording," Ven insisted. He'd been clutching that data-rod against his chest for the past few days like it was more valuable than his life, which maybe it was.

"We don't even know what it means," Asyr reminded him. "I haven't heard anything back from your partner at the BSA. He might be under arrest by now."

"He might be dead," Rev Lessed said dourly.

Ven shook his head, adamant. "Sham-Vi-Diin's alive. He'll help us, I know he will. What's on this recording is the key to what we've both been looking for."

"It sounds like you two are close," Lessex observed.

The young man's resolute expression faltered. "Not really," he admitted, "But in this I trust him. I have to."

He had nobody else, Asyr thought dourly. They'd tried to contact Tresk Im'nel too, using both the hotel's comm system and Asyr's personal one, and nothing worked. She suspected the BDF had erected heavy dampening fields outside both BSA headquarters and the New Republic consulate, though there was no way to be sure of anything at this point.

The helplessness made her want to scream. She'd come here to find evidence of Borsk Fey'lya's complicity in all this mess. She still wanted to find some, if it was there. That recording of Pedric Cuf could be exactly what NRI needed to find the missing link the weapon supply chain.

"When the Republic comes, we have to find a way to contact them directly," Asyr said. "I don't suppose this hotel comm system can reach ships in orbit?"

Ven shook his head. "I already checked. Its signal gets routed through the primary transmitter on the island west of Cephalia. I'm sure the BDF has that locked down now."

"Is there no other way to send a signal? Not on the entire island?"

"Pretty much all civilian ones are routed through there. Government facilities, and probably some corporate ones, have long-range transmitters on-site."

"What about your BSA precinct offices? Do they have anything?"

"No. The headquarters building doesn't either. All BSA transmissions are piped through another site located up on the mount-"

He froze. His blond brows drew together in thought.

"Do you think the BDF will have it secured?" Asyr asked urgently.

"I'm not sure. It's usually unmanned. They might have a few guards stationed, but I doubt more than that."

"Why do you think that?"

"You haven't been on the streets. The BDF patrols in this city are already under-manned and spread pretty thin. The BDF simply doesn't have the manpower to take over every island on this planet *and* deal with the New Republic in orbit."

"So you're saying we can get to the transmitter on foot?"

"It will be a walk," Ven admitted. He peeled open the window-shade and looked at the sky outside. The sun was setting low and the light was turning gold. After so long in this room Asyr had forgotten what time it was outside; the passage of hours had become irrelevant.

"I think," the young policemen ventured, "We can try and go once the sun sets."

"Do you know your way to the transmitter station?"

"I know Cephalia, even in the dark. I can get us there."

Lessex broke the silence with a long, pained sigh. "None of this is going to help us find my brother, is it?"

Asyr felt a stab of guilt. She'd been so preoccupied with her own goals that she'd forgotten the more private pain on the man beside her. She wondered how many other people on Bavinyar were facing the same kind of intimate crisis, with no one to help them.

"Our best chance to find your brother is to end this crisis," Ven said gently. "Once we get out of here, you don't have to come with us. You can go back to the Corniche. I'm sure your sister must be worried."

Lessex blinked, like he'd forgotten all about her. He shook his head and said, "I didn't stay cooped up with you guys all this time just to run. I want to help. I *need* to help."

"It could be dangerous," Asyr warned.

"I know how to use a blaster," Lessex said bravely. "If it will help me find Javen, I'll come with you both."

Asyr glanced at Ven, uncertain whether this confused human would really be an asset. The other man placed a hand on Lessex's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze.

"I appreciate this more than I can say. Bavinyar needs more men like you."

"I just want to do the right thing."

"It's what you've been doing all along, Mr. Lessex."

Asyr cleared her throat. "So we go come nightfall. Is that the plan?"

"I think so," Ven said, then hesitated. "I just hope Sham-Vi-Diin finds a way to contact us before then. It could mean everything."

Punching through the dampening field the BDF had erected over BSA headquarters wasn't easy, but once again Sham-Vi-Diin found himself grateful for the counter-terrorism training he'd received under the Imperials decades ago.

The hardest part had been getting out of his office. His two stone-faced human guards gave him a hard enough time when he said he needed to use the refresher; it took him a good half-hour before he convinced them to let him go down into the bottom levels of the BSA head-quarters building because he wanted to check and make sure all BSA landspeeders and equipment were safely stored, unstolen by rogue Cereans who might have been part of Korr-Mad-Narr's plot. Once he threatened to call General Kaice, they commed Major Brenner instead, and Brenner apparently gave them the go-ahead.

Once in the vehicle garage beneath the headquarters, Sham-Vi-Diin found an excuse to get inside the cockpit of one of the heavy speeders. Ostensibly checking to make sure its automated security system was still working, he turned on its comm system without starting the other systems and pushed its transmitter freq to the highest end of the spectrum the machine would allow. Then he slipped out, reported all was well, and performed the security check he's promised, his human guards staring over his shoulder all the while.

When he finally got back to his office, he locked the door behind him and immediately turned on his commlink. He'd memorized the identification number for the system in the landspeeder and patched his comm into that machine so that it

effectively worked as a relay. With the landspeeder's comm set to broadcast as a spectrum higher than standard systems were set to receive, he didn't expect the dampening field to catch the outgoing signal.

It didn't. The question, then, was who to call. There wasn't much in the way of possible answers. Once sent out, the signal would be received by most systems as a burst of screeching noise. Normally that high-end frequency was only used for emergency communications between BSA members. The only person he could think of who'd even know how to handle that transmission was his erstwhile human partner, Detective Ven.

Sham-Vi-Diin found himself hesitating. He reminded himself how little he really knew about Aryon Ven, other than that he was young and eager, apparently earnest and definitely the sole human detective in a homicide department otherwise occupied by Cereans. He remembered asking Ven once why he decided to join the BSA as opposed to the BDF like most other patriotic Bavinyari humans. Ven had replied that he'd been raised in Cephalia and wanted to protect every-one in it.

And that, Sham-Vi-Diin supposed, was all he needed to know.

There was still no way to know if Ven was even alive on in Cephalia, but Sham-Vi-Diin sent out the signal. He only had to wait ten seconds before someone picked up.

"Chief Sham-Vi-Diin, is that you?" the young human's voice came clear over the comlink.

"That's right," the Cerean smiled with weary relief. "What's your status, Detective?"

"About the same as last time, sir. I'm holed up with my... contacts in a hotel."

"Don't tell me where."

"I won't. Sir, are you still at BSA headquarters?"

"Yes. I've found a way around the dampening field they've thrown up, but I'm not sure how long it will last."

"Sir, have you looked into that recording I sent you?"

"I have. The lead man in that file, the one buying the weapons, is Major Brenner of the BDF." He heard someone, probably not Ven,

intake breath. He went on, "Brenner is a close aide to General Kaice. I suspect that if Brenner was in on the buy, so was Kaice, though I can't prove anything."

"What about Syne?" asked a female voice.

"Syne... I don't think she was in on it, though I can't say that for certain either. It's just a gut feeling."

"Thank you for all that, sir," said Ven. "I'll make sure to pass it along."

Sham-Vi-Diin restrained the urge to ask where, exactly, Ven was going to pass it to. Anything they said over this line might still be intercepted. He simply had to trust the young human to make the right choice.

At the moment, it was the only thing he could trust at all.

"Detective, will I still be able to contact you when I need you?" he asked.

"I... think so. But we'll be on the move."

"I understand. I may call again, if necessary. Good luck, Detective.

"You too, Chief."

Sham-Vi-Diin shut off the connection. He sat back in his chair and looked at his shaking hands.

Whatever Aryon Ven was going to do, it probably involved contacting the New Republic with the information he'd found. There weren't many ways to do that, and all of them were risky. Sham-Vi-Diin felt like a coward sitting here in his office, waiting to be pulled on the BDF's strings like a damned puppet.

There had to be another way to talk to Syne. If Kaice wouldn't let him speak in person, he'd have to find another way.

He rolled the round metal comlink in the palm of his hand and tried to think of what to do.

—CHAPTER FOURTEEN—

When the New Republic task force arrived in orbit over Bavinyar, General Kaice came and delivered the news with a dark, resolved expression on his face. He said that the Republic flagship had volunteered to send a shuttle down to retrieve its staff. Syne acknowledged that with a tilt of the head and remained in her office. She never had any intention of presenting herself to whatever soldiers the Republic sent down to Cephalia.

She was, therefore, taken by surprise when another BDF officer came and told her that the head of the New Republic task force had come down to the planet with the retrieval team requesting a private conversation with her. It was a request Syne couldn't bring herself to refuse; she told the officer to hold her visitor for three minutes while she prepared.

It had been easy enough to learn that the task force was being led by Etahn A'baht. She'd expected her old Dornean commander to comm her when he arrived in orbit, but when that hadn't come she'd assumed he wouldn't talk to her at all. It has been years since she'd spoken with him; A'baht was a senior staff officer in the NRDF now and she had no way of knowing how that would effect

his behavior, his decisions. He might have become a whole different being.

Yet when he walked alone into her office and she looked at his broad, leathery, aubergine face, she realized that Etahn A'baht was already far older than she'd ever be, and he hadn't changed at all.

She resisted the urge to salute him. "Thank you for coming down to speak with me, General."

"I figured I owed that much," said A'baht, without specifying to who or what he owed. To her, perhaps, or to the Republic that he'd become part of.

"I've given you back Gavrisom and most of your diplomatic staff," Syne reminded him. "I've shown I have no ill will against your Republic."

"You're still holding Senator Behn-Kihl-Nahm and the Jedi hostage."

She shook her head. "They agreed to stay. Do you really think Behn-Kihl-Nahm would abandon his world?"

"I think that you're making a mistake," A'baht said. "A terminal one."

She grimaced. She should have known better than to expect A'baht to blunt his words. "So, what do you want to do, General? Lay down all arms? Tell the BDF to disband, hand over all the rights my people have gained since coming back to Bavinyar?"

"Princess Leia believed your intentions were good, that you wanted a compromise where all Bavinyari could live as one. I can't tell you how disappointed she is."

"We have no ill will toward Organa Solo, or to you. We just want to clean up our own mess without someone else interfering."

"Who is 'we', Captain?"

The use of her old rank made her flinch. "The people of Bavinyar."

"The humans, you mean?"

"All people. Extremists- Cerean *and* human- have let this situation spiral out of control. The only way to bring it back under control is to strike hard and eradicate them both. The democratic, civilian power structure the Republic forces on us isn't enough."

"I understand your BDF has Palt-Ri-Gen trapped in the mining facility at Leonal."

"That's correct."

"And what about Aviran Kolin and the rest of the BIL leaders? Where are they?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I will find them."

A'baht took a step closer. "Let's try and find a compromise, Captain. If you agree to step down, surrender martial law, and reinstate Korr-Mad-Narr as head of the BSA, my forces will complete your operation at Leonal."

"Not good enough. You'd rob us of every power we've gained here."

"We. Us. Are you even bothering to speak for the other half of Bavinyar's population, Captain?"

"Of course I have more sympathy for the humans," she snarled. "Do you want me to lie and pretend I don't? I always have and always will. But I'm still committed to ending this. That means stopping the CPF *and* the BIL, on our own."

"I've brought a handful of Jedi with me," A'baht said.

She stared. She'd never told the old Dornean that her father had been a Jedi, but perhaps Organa Solo had. Perhaps he hadn't meant anything by the statement other than a warning.

She licked dry lips and asked, "What will you do with those Jedi?"

"That remains to be seen, but they've been left at my disposal."

"Will you send them into the hell beneath Leonal?"

"I may."

She had to admit the idea had some attraction. The Jedi might be able to save hostages, maybe even capture Palt-Ri-Gen in those dark tunnels. When she sent the next wave of BDF troops down, she knew she'd only end up with even more bloodshed. At the same time, the BDF would be furious with her. They'd see it as a betrayal of their role as Bavinyar's primary defenders, and they wouldn't be wrong.

"Please, Captain," said A'baht, "Let us start there. I am trying to help."

"What are your conditions for sending the Jedi into Leonal?"

A'baht's eyes narrowed as he considered. Then, to her shock, he said, "I have no conditions."

It was not like A'baht to be generous. His hard Dornean face stared right at hers, betraying nothing.

"I have no conditions," he repeated. "Just pull the BDF troops out of the mining facility. I will send our Jedi and NRDF ground forces in their stead. We will capture Leonal with as little bloodshed as possible. I promise you that, Captain."

"And then, I suppose, we meet again for another talk."

"That's right."

"Have you been authorized to make that decision by Organa Solo?"

"She left the entire operation plan to me."

Syne tilted her head. "It seems you've gained her trust, General."

"Yes," he said, "I've earned it."

Unlike her. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply in and out, and said, "Very well. I will inform General Kaice to begin pulling troops out of the facility. But you may *only* land troops at Leonal. Any attempt to send troops to Cephalia will be considered an act of war against the Bavinyari people."

A'baht nodded. "And if any of *your* ships in orbit fire on ours, that, too, will cross a line."

"I know that. But for now, we have an agreement, don't we?"

"I suppose we do. I'll have my people send you the most up-to-date information on the Leonal facility." Syne looked down at her hands. Awkwardly, she extended one to shake.

A'baht reached out, taking her small white hand in his large, rough one. He squeezed it hard, and she squeezed it back.

As he stepped for the door, A'baht said, "Thank you for being reasonable, Captain."

"Thank *you*, General," she said quietly and watched him go.

When he left the room, Major Brenner stepped inside with a question on his face. She told him, "Go find General Kaice. Bring him to me."

Brenner saluted and left. Syne settled back into the chair behind her desk and waited for her general to come. He'd put up a fight, of course, but she'd get him to honor her deal with A'baht. She had to. If she didn't, things would only get very worse.

Deep within the NRDF headquarters facility on Coruscant, the observation room was abuzz with activity. Staffers swarmed around the edges of the chambers while senior command staff leaned around the broad central table, where operational data from *Intrepid* was being fed back to the capital with a split-second's delay and recreated as a tactical holo that detailed positions of all Republic and BDF ships now hanging in orbit over Bavinyar.

The sight of so many warships ready to fight was enough to make Leia feel sick inside.

Her husband leaned along the table beside her and whispered in a low voice, "Maybe there won't be any fighting."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Well, A'baht just got back from the planet. Maybe he cut some deal with Syne."

Leia wished she could believe that too, but in the end, A'baht's first warning had been right. Despite everything in her past, or possibly because of it, Jadesei Syne was a Bavinyari patriot above all else, with no deep loyalty to the New Republic.

A tactical officer called, "Transmission incoming from *Intrepid*, audio-only."

"Please, bring it up," Leia called.

After a second, a scratchy, familiar voice said, "This is Battle Group Command. Do you copy, Coruscant?"

"Loud and clear, General," Leia said. "What's your status?"

"I've spoken with Prime Minister Syne," said A'baht. "She's ordered her ships to hold position and agreed to let some of our people land."

Muted cheers rang around the table but the tension didn't leave Leia. "What kind of landing? Can we retrieve Behn-Kihl-Nahm and Gavrisom?"

"Gavrisom has come back to *Intrepid* with me. Unfortunately, she insists on retaining possession of some of our people in the consulate," A'baht said, and Leia watched the joy drain from the faces around her. "She has, however, pulled her BDF troops back from the facility on Leonal and is allowing us to insert a team of commandos in their place. Masters Hamner, Solusar, and Katarn will be going down to assist. I hope we can defuse the hostage crisis that way."

"Thank you, General. You've done well so far. Keep your ships in position over the planet."

"Of course, Princess. We'll relay a comm feed with the ground team so we can keep you updated."

"Thank you, General."

"Battle Group Command, out."

The last light had fled the sky and a chill was starting to settle in Cephalia's damp air. The city lights were bright behind them but ahead there was only dark escarpment, rocks and shrub ascending gradually toward the volcanic peak that made up the high point of the island.

Aryon Ven was grateful they didn't have to go all the way to the top. It was difficult enough to scramble up to the transmission tower; he took the lead, with Rev Lessex behind him and Asyr Sei'lar at the rear. Apparently Bothans had better night-vision than humans, but even she repeatedly slipped and fell, sometimes catching herself with her forward paws and other times tearing the sleeves of her clothes on sharp rocks or jutting roots.

Ven wished they could use the night-vision helmets that BSA special operations teams had, but as it was, all they had to help them was the hand-held flashlight Ven normally kept at his belt. Flashing it too often would alert any guards at the transmission tower to their approach, so he only used it when he found it absolutely impossible to discern a way up the terrain. As a result, they'd all picked up their shares of ugly scraped and bruises, but thankfully no one had twisted an ankle or broken any bones.

When they finally reached the point where the base of the transmitter was visible, Ven ducked low, stomach against the dirty slope, and looked behind him. He saw Asyr and Lessex scramble up to meet him but his eyes went beyond them, to the brilliant skyline of Bavinyar's capital, lit up in the night. He'd spent almost his whole life in that city, but it had never taken his breath away like it did now.

Lessex seemed to notice his gaze. The other human crawled up beside Ven and said, "It almost looks normal, doesn't it?"

It did. A little darker, perhaps, but the gorgeous skyline gave no indication of the turmoil taking place in its government offices or the streets left barren by the fear of martial law.

Asyr came up on Ven's other side and said, "What now? Are there guards?"

"A good question," Ven said, and wished once again that he'd had a set of macrobinoculars on his person when this whole mess started.

"I can't see much of anything," Lessex said.

"Let's me try to get a little closer," Asyr said. "I can see better than you and I'll be harder to spot."

Ven couldn't deny either count. "Go ahead. Do you have your pistol?"

"I do."

"Is it set to stun?"

After a tiny pause, Asyr said, "Yes."

"Good. I don't want to kill anyone if we don't have to. First, scout it out. Then come back to us."

"Understood. Stay here."

Ven watched the black-furred, dark-clothed Bothan woman scrambled up the rocks. Even as he tried to keep an eye on her movement, Asyr quickly disappeared into the dark.

"Handy having her, isn't it?" Lessex whispered.

"Very." Ven drew his own sidearm and checked to make sure it was set to *stun*.

"I really wish I had one of those," muttered Lessex.

"I hope you won't need one," Ven said. He had no idea if Lessex actually knew how to shoot one or if he was just being overeager. He appreciated that the man was trying to be helpful, but Ven's short police career had also taught him to distrust civilians who thought they could do his job for him.

As for Asyr, she was different. He still didn't know the NRI agent's backstory, but everything from her body language to her sharp, direct questions marked her as having a military background. Once this was over, he looked forward to getting her whole story.

The silence between them felt ominous. There was no sight of Asyr and no sound of talking or weapons-fire, which was a good thing, but Ven couldn't help but be on edge.

Apparently trying to break the tension, Lessex asked, "If we get that recording to the New Republic, do you really think it will end this?"

"I don't know," Ven admitted.

"I never really... trusted the Republic. I mean, I never had anything against them. I just... I don't know. I was always taught Bavinyari could only look out for each other."

Ven had been taught they too; they all had. Maybe it was how they'd gotten into this damned mess in the first place.

"All I know," Ven whispered, "Is that without this, there's no evidence at all that the BDF helped kill Pohl-Had-Narr."

"What do you think that Cerean partner you have is doing now?"

Ven had no idea. He didn't even know what Sham-Vi-Diin's circumstances were when they'd last talked.

"The right thing," Ven said. He was sure of that, and nothing else.

He watched Lessex's silhouette nod beside him, but the other man said nothing else. The silence that draped over them felt a little less ominous this time. They settled down, and they waited.

He didn't know how long they waited, but eventually the sound of a body scampering back down the scree could be heard. Ven

raised his pistol just in case, but sure enough a black Bothan appeared right in front of them.

"What did you find?" asked Ven.

"I saw two guards making rounds," said Asyr.

"We have two pistols. Perfect."

"They're both walking around the perimeter. They're not going fast and they don't look very alert either."

"The hard part will be timing it so we drop them simultaneously." Ven tapped the flashlight he'd hooked to his belt. "How about this? I'll take the south end and you take the north. Mr. Lessex, when I'm in position and have a clear shot, I'll flash this once against the ground so only you can see it. Then you give a wave so Asyr can see you."

"And then what?" the Bothan asked.

"Then we both wait five seconds, then we take our shot."

Asyr thought for a moment; then her head bobbed an affirmative. "All right. I can do that."

"Can *you* to that, Mr. Lessex?"

The human nodded too. "You can count on me."

Ven found himself glad they'd brought the civvie on after all. "Okay," he said, "Let's get going."

Once again, Sham-Vi-Diin muttered quiet gratitude to the Imperials who'd taught him so many good tricks so long ago. After setting up the landspeeder in the basement garage as a long-range transceiver, he'd managed to do the rest from his little office. The BDF apparently hadn't thought to remove his privileges from the BSA's central database system, which was how he was able to access the secure transponder frequencies for such top-level personages as the deposed Korr-Mad-Narr and even the Prime Minister herself.

When he sent the Prime Minister a message, it would come across on the upper-band freq that he'd used to call Aryon Ven. Unlike the detective, Syne wouldn't automatically know how to receive a BSA emergency signal. She was, however, a former naval officer with the Dorneans and the New Republic, and he hoped

she'd figure out how to adjust her own comlink to properly receive his message.

It was a gamble. It was also a gamble that she wasn't in the middle of some high-level conversation with General Kaice or Major Brenner. It was a gamble that her comm wasn't bugged by the BDF. It was a gamble she'd listen to him at all. But in the end, he needed to try talking to the Prime Minister, and this was the only way he had to do it.

His heart nearly burst from his chest when the comm line clicked and a female voice said, "This is the Prime Minister. Who the devil is this?"

"Madam, this is Sham-Vi-Diin, acting director of the BSA," he whispered. "Can we speak right now?"

After pause, she said in lowered voice, "Director, this is most unusual. Why are you contacting me like this?"

"Madam, I don't think I'd be permitted to talk to you via normal channel. We have to speak quickly. This is very important."

"What is important? Director, we're in the middle of a crisis-"

"I know, but it's not the crisis you think it is. Madam, I have very strong evidence that elements in the BDF killed Pohl-Had-Narr."

After a long, long pause, she asked, "What evidence?"

"A holo-recording one of my detectives retrieved from Cephalia's landing complex. It shows Major Brenner, in plainclothes, purchasing equipment from a smuggler named Pedric Cuf, who's already been named as supplying the BIL with New Republic weapons."

"I know who Pedric Cuf is," Syne said sharply.

"I'm sending the package now," Sham-Vi-Diin said, and tapped a button on his comlink. While it transferred he said, "Review it yourself, Madam. Brenner can clearly be recognized at the end. I strong suspect General Kaice put him up to it."

"General Kaice is my most trusted officer." Syne asked bitterly. "What proof do you have?"

"A gut feeling, Madam."

"And how do you know this man is Pedric Cuf?"

Sham-Vi-Diin didn't know exactly, so he breathed, "It's a very long story, but my partner, Aryon Ven- a *human*- put this together."

"And where is Detective Ven now?"

"Honestly, Madam, I don't know. That's not the point. The point is, the sale on the recording you see was made just hours before Cuf made another longer stop at Leonal, probably to pass more weapons to the BIL. But he made this short sale to Brenner, the BDF, first. Madam, this happened just *days* before Pohl-Had-Narr was killed."

There was no sound over the comlink for almost a minute. He said, "Madam, have you watched the recording?"

Her sigh crackled over the link. "No, but I will look into it right now. Director... Thank you for this. I know it was a risk."

"I just want to do what's best for Bavinyar. For *all* Bavinyar."

Another sigh. "Thank you, Director. I'm glad someone is."

The line clicked off. Sham-Vi-Diin put his comlink on his desk and felt his whole body deflate as he sunk down into his seat. It was over and done with and a huge part of his felt relived, but another part felt disbelief. One short comm conversation was an anticlimax. He didn't even know if Syne would look at his recording or what she'd do once he did, but he'd done all he could. He told himself that and tried to feel good by it.

He heard footsteps in the silence hallway outside. He jerked upright in his seat and reached by instinct for his pistol. When the door slid open the first thing he saw was the tip of a blaser-rifle as he was ready. He caught the first BDF officer in the stomach; the human fell back but the one behind him fired over his fallen partner's shoulder.

That blast caught Sham-Vi-Diin square in the chest, pinning him to his chair. He managed only a tiny, pathetic groan as the blaster fell from his fingers and clattered softly on the carpeted floor. The soldier stood on the other side of his desk, rifle still raised and level, grew blurry as his vision swam.

His head rolled to one side of its own volition. He could make out the gleam of his comlink on the desk and cursed himself for falling back on instinct. In his last moment, he should have had the

sense to call Syne and tell her that her comlink was being monitored.

But it was too late. It was too late for everything. He'd failed yet again.

When the recording ended and left Major Brenner's face burned into Syne's memory, she began to pace back and forth in front of her office window and tried to decide what to do.

That recording was proof of nothing; evidence perhaps of something, but even that depended on context, and for that she only had Sham-Vi-Diin's word. And even then, the recording could have been faked, either by the Cerean or another party.

Yet she believed it in her heart. She didn't want to, but she did. Since Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination, a creeping feeling had been settling over her, a knowledge that no matter how she tried to steer Bavinyar on a straight course, the more events spiraled beyond her control.

She tried to assess it rationally. First, assuming this Sham-Vi-Diin was correct, and the recording did show Major Brenner buying a selection of weapons from Pedric Cuf, the rest of which he'd soon sell to the BIL, then it was clear there was some connection between elements of the BDF and the BIL extremists. It would explain much; certainly, the use of the New Republic military-grade weapon to kill Pohl-Had-Narr, and the apparent innocence of the BIL in that attack.

And it wasn't beyond the BDF's capability. She had to admit the military had always possessed hard-liners, though she'd never expected them to be so hard that they'd outright assassinate a sitting, democratically-elected president just because he was Cerean.

But no, it was more than that. They'd killed him so they could put a human in power; so they could put *her* in power. If Brenner had been acting independently in killing Pohl-Had-Narr then they could have never known what would follow: not the terrorist bombings by the BIL, not the CPF's seizure of Leonal, and not the New Republic's vote to intervene with its military.

But they could have anticipated something *like* all that would happen, and with a human- with Jadesei Syne- in charge, they might have figured they could use the chaos to their advantage and make a move toward the ultimate goal of a Bavinyar independent of any outside govern-ment, a Bavinyar for humans and humans only.

Perhaps. It made grim, awful, humiliating sense, but she couldn't know for sure, not with just this recording.

The one thing she knew for certain was that in letting things come this far and get this bad, in letting herself be *used*, she'd disgraced her mother's legacy. The burning shame of that probably clouded her judgment, but she knew it wouldn't go away now, and probably never would.

In trying to decide how to move forward, it all came down to what General Kaice knew. Sham-Vi-Diin was correct; Brenner has been brought through the ranks on Kaice's coat-tails and the two officers had remained close throughout this crisis. As much as Syne tried to deny it, as much as she'd trusted Kaice so much up until now, she couldn't believe he *wouldn't* engineer this situation; he'd always been a hard man, and a human patriot above all else.

She couldn't trust Kaice right now, which meant she couldn't trust anyone else in the BDF either. There was no way to know who he might have involved in this.

The Bavinyar night seemed to encroach around her in her office, leaving her utterly alone, open to threats from all sides. Yet far above the night, she knew, there was still Etahn A'baht, honestly trying to find a way out of this debacle with as little violence as possible.

Syne had known A'baht far longer than she'd known Kaice or anyone surrounding her now. She'd trusted him for just as long.

She stopped her furious pacing and moved for her desk. She connected her comlink to its data port and ran through her head what she could tell A'baht.

Before she could turn the transmitter on, the doors to her office slid open without warning. General Kaice walked inside. She saw no one behind him. The doors closed, leaving them alone, staring at one another from across the room.

She did her best to keep a straight face. "Well, General? What is it?"

"Fresh news from the Jedi incursion," Kaice said.

"Jedi incursion?"

"The Jedi and Republic troops entering the Leonal facility have met with resistance. Please, Madam, come to the situation room immediately."

She cursed quietly. "Did we get the hostages out?"

"Less than half. There's already been casualties. Come."

"Give me two minutes, General. I'll be down as soon as I can."

Kaice didn't move. "Is there a problem, Madam?"

"No. I just need to take care of one thing. Go on ahead. I'll be right behind you."

She reached out with her meager Force powers and tried to get a sense of Kaice. He was hard to read as always, his emotions guarded. She saw his eyes drift to her desktop and fall on the comlink plugged into the dataport, then felt unmistakable alarm.

He knew. His hand went to the service pistol holstered at his belt. Syne's went to her own hip-

-and found nothing. She wasn't a soldier anymore.

Kaice's shot caught her in the stomach. The force knocked her back against her window. Her head snapped against the glass but she barely felt it against the pain blossoming over the rest of her body. She slumped down to the floor, shoulders and back still propped against the window.

Syne was a soldier. She knew gut-shots killed slowly and painfully. When the agony became too much she'd pass out, and after that, eventually, her heart would stop beating. Right now the pain was flooding around her body from the locus in her abdomen; it was difficult to even keep her eyes open.

She watched helplessly as Kaice walked around to her side of the desk. He looked down at her, and through the Force she could sense it all bleeding out of him: the pity, the contempt, the tiny twinge of regret. He still clasped the pistol tight in one hand, and she was sure he was about to raise it and put a final bolt in her head, ending her, ending everything.

But he didn't. He sighed and placed his pistol on the top of her desk. Then he pulled her comlink out of the data port and turned on her personal transmission system.

Still looking down at her, still radiating all of it in the Force, he turned on the transmitter and said, "All BDF forces, this is an emergency transmission from General Kaice. I regret to inform you that Prime Minister Syne has been killed by Cerean assassins, acting in collusion with the New Republic and elements of the BSA. For this affront, no quarter can be given.

"All ships in orbit, any New Republic vessel is now considered a hostile. If they attempt to move any closer to this planet or land any more troops, shoot to kill." Kaice swallowed, then added, "All New Republic personnel on Bavinyar are now considered enemies of the state. Apprehend them if possible. All Jedi should be considered especially dangerous and must be eliminated with prejudice.

"Draw strength from your grief in this desperate hour. I encourage you all to fight as long as you can. For Bavinyar, and for our independence. Thank you, and good luck."

He shut off the transmission and took a long, deep breath. He looked down on her again. Her eyes had gotten blurry but she blinked them into focus on his face.

"I didn't want this to happen," Kaice told her, "But you should have stayed loyal to Bavinyar, *our* Bavinyar. You've disgraced your mother's legacy."

She wanted to respond but breath burned in her lungs. Worse, he was right. She *had* disgraced her mother, but not the way he'd meant.

And yet, as Syne stared at him and he stared at her, she felt the Force around her more strongly than ever. She felt Kaice's soft regret and hard determination; she felt the familiar room around her and the soldiers so high above as they started to die.

She may have failed her mother, but her father had not failed her, not at the end.

She knew Jedi could move objects with their mind. She'd never been able to do it before but she tried now. She focused her dying thoughts on the sidearm resting atop her desk, its barrel-tip angled

toward the window. It was the same standard pistol every BDF officer carried, and she knew every curve of it, every angle.

She willed it, ever so slightly, to point at General Kaice's chest. And to her shock it nudged, ever so slightly, on the desktop.

Then she found the trigger and pulled. There was a flash of light, and a whiff of scorched flesh; one more layer of it over the smell of her own burnt body.

Then Kaice staggered and fell atop her legs, his weight tipping hers so both fell to the floor. Syne felt a meager twinge of satisfaction, and after that, nothing at all.

—CHAPTER FIFTEEN—

When the Bavinyar Defense Force ships opened fire, they did it without warning. Despite that, the Republic fleet managed to escape the initial volley with minimal casualties. Most of its ships were already pulled out of firing range of the Bavinyari ships and most of those on the forward lines had shields raised. Still, when Etahn A'baht saw a flight of E-wing fighters wink out on the tactical holo, he felt a growl of frustration escape his throat.

"What are they *doing*?" gaped Captain Morano.

"They appear to be attacking," A'baht grumbled.

"That's stupid. That's suicide."

The ship's tactical officer, Corgan, pointed at the holo. "They might be attacking, but they're not moving."

"So are they setting up a blockade?" asked Morano. "They don't have enough ships for that."

"I don't know what they're doing, but we're not going to provoke them. Have all ships pull back."

"Gladly" said Corgan, and he quickly relayed the order to the rest of the task force.

A'baht stalked over to the comm station and said, "Lieutenant, hail the Bavinyari flagship. I doubt they'll answer but we might at least try and learn what the blazes is going on."

"Gladly, sir," the Dresselian said. As soon the message went out, his wrinkled forehead creased deeper.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"We're getting some automated response. Sir..."

"What *is* it?"

"Sir, it says the Prime Minister Syne has been killed by New Republic agents."

A'baht staggered; he caught the back of the lieutenant's seat to stay aright. "Killed?"

"Yes, sir. They're declaring all Republic forces enemies of Bavinyar and warning us to keep off the planet."

Killed. A'baht suddenly felt the full weight of his many years. He'd seen many beings from many shorter-lived races wither and die, and many, too, die in combat against the Empire or Yevetha. Jasedei Syne was different; he'd known her since she was a mere teenager and somehow, as she'd progressed into human middle age, she'd remained in his mind's eye still an eager youth determined to do all she could in the name of her brutalized planet, and later her martyred parents.

He didn't believe for a second that Republic assassins had really killed her, but whatever had happened to her, she'd deserved a far better fate than *this*.

He turned and marched back to the tactical holo, where Morano and Corgan were waiting. So much of *Intrepid's* crew was new to him, but they had both served under A'baht on this very same bridge seven years ago during the Yevethan crisis. They knew how to handle themselves when the fighting got ugly, and he was glad for that. He had a feeling he'd be glad for little else when this day was over.

"We heard, sir," Morano said. "Should we hold this line?"

"No. They said all Republic forces must stay off Bavinyar. Captain, we already have people there, including a half-dozen Jedi and our Defense Minister."

"Then we attack?"

A'baht looked one more time at the string of hostile red lights strung across that tactical holo. "We'll do everything we can to protect our people," he said, "Even if we have to punch through that line."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm didn't need the Force to tell him things were getting bad. Even with the total communications blackout around the New Republic consulate, the fact that they'd heard nothing in the hours since Gavrisom's departure could only be a bad thing. Knowing it was annoying, he kept on asking Tresk Im'nel if he was feeling anything in the Force that might tell them what was going on in orbit, and again and again Im'nel shook his furry head and kept his long face in a consternated scowl.

Then, finally, without Behn-Kihl-Nahm even asking, Im'nel said, "It's started."

"You mean the fighting?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm pointed to the ceiling and the stars far beyond.

The Bothan Jedi took a deep, labored breath. "They're dying up there. I can feel it."

Both beings looked to the door of their chamber, as if expecting BDF forced to march in guns-blazing at any minute. Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, with more assurance than he felt, "They won't execute us out of hand. They'll destroy their last bargaining chips."

"That's assuming they care about such things," Im'nel said gruffly. He tugged Behn-Kihl-Nahm's sleeve and started leading him to the far side of the room's long dining table, near the window that looked out the adjacent towers of Cephalia's skyline.

"What are you doing?" Behn-Kihl-Nahm asked.

"Defending ourselves the best we can." Im'nel made a gesture with one paw, and the long table seemed to flip over on its own. Light-holders clattered to the floor as its top fell sideways, creating a waist-high vertical barrier between them and the door.

"It's not much, but it's the best we can do for when they come," the Bothan Jedi said.

"When? Have you felt that too?"

Im'nel nodded gravely. "Someone very determined is coming. A group of them."

"Are they here? In this building?"

"And getting closer. Keep your head *down*, Minister."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm crouched down behind the table. "Are you certain? I can't believe Syne would just *execute* us."

"It may not be up to Syne any more." Im'nel plucked his lightsaber off his hip and ignited it. The blazing blade stretched toward the ceiling.

Behn-Kihl-Nahm couldn't believe it was about to end like this, gunned down while cowering behind a table in his own home city. Worse yet, he'd died a failure, a Cerean who'd been so preoccupied with galactic politics that he'd let his own home tear itself apart.

Self-loathing or self-pity, whichever it was, vanished when the door exploded. Smoke filled the room and blaster-bolts sliced through the smoke. Behn-Kihl-Nahm cowered down, doing his best to keep his cone-shaped head behind the barrier, all the while wondering if the damned table would protect them at all.

Over his head, Tresk Im'nel spun his lightsaber, skillfully deflecting bolt after bolt back at their attackers. Behn-Kihl-Nahm didn't dare peek over the table's edge to try and see their attackers, but he was sure that they must have taken cover behind the door-frame. Im'nel seemed to be battling them back now, but he'd only get more tired, and they could only bring in more troops.

Beneath the tang of laserfire and the thrum of the lightsaber, Behn-Kihl-Nahm heard something else. It sounded like the whine of spacecraft engines. The entire room seemed to tremble, and he looked out the window just in time to see the engine-flare of some starship as it sidled against the consulate tower, right on level with their room.

There was no helping them now. He wanted to shout something to Im'nel, he hasn't sure what; maybe just *thank you*.

Then the Bothan shut off his lightsaber and dropped to the floor, pinning Behn-Kihl-Nahm beneath him. The window shattered, spraying glass over them. Two bodies sprung into the

room and Behn-Kihl-Nahm realized in shock that he heard two more lightsabers blazing.

Im'nel sprung to his feet and jumped over the table. Behn-Kihl-Nahm brushed the glass shards off his clothes and peeked over the table-to to see the Bothan Jedi join two more- a Mon Calamari and a black-haired human. Together, the three of them made short work of the BDF attackers. Behn-Kihl-Nahm couldn't help but admire the grace with which the Jedi snapped the barrels off of blaster-rifles and dropped armored soldiers with well-placed elbows and knees and nudges of the Force.

When their attackers were finally all down, wounded but alive, the three Jedi turned to Behn-Kihl-Nahm. The human said, "Minister, come with us. We'll get you out of here."

Behn-Kihl-Nahm was more grateful than he could say, so all he did was nod.

It was tricky, keeping an eye on the dark figure walking around the base of the transmitter complex with a rifle in both arms, while also trying to watch the crouched, even darker figure of Rev Lessex as he waited for Aryon Ven's signal. There were still too many things that could go wrong, but at least they had the signal worked out. She only hoped that when she got her one shot at that guard, it would fly true.

When the signal came she saw it clearly; two arms waving in the dark. She shifted her focus to the guard as she counted in her head, *one, two, three, four*.

Then she heard the sharp tang of a stung-shot being fired on the far side of the transmission complex. No point in counting to *five*. She squeezed the trigger and the stun bolt from her pistol slipped through the vertical slats of the security fence. It cut straight and caught the guard in the chest. She heard a muffled groan, then watched as he dropped his weapon and fell to the duracrete platform.

She waited, pistol still pressed against the fence, blood pounding in her ears, waiting for some signal from Ven, or worse, for some third guard she'd missed to come running out.

She saw a figure crawl up onto the platform on the other end and flash his light twice in her direction. Asyr stood, waved, and began to work her way around to the opposite side of the platform, where Ven had broken the lock that secured the perimeter fence's sole gate. She stuffed her pistol beneath her belt and climbed onto the platform, where she saw Ven standing at the base of the transmission tower. A second after that spotted Lessex pulling a rifle from beneath a collapsed guard.

"Come on," she hissed, "You won't need that now!"

"I just want to be sure."

Lessex cradled the rifle against his chest as he and Asyr both hurried over to the base of the tower. Ven had pulled open the access hatch and was sliding the data-rod with the recording into the input slot. Light from an overhead panel shone down on them, making Asyr squint and wince.

"Tell me you know how to make it send," Lessex breathed.

Ven bit his lip. "I think so. Where am I supposed to send this to?"

Asyr shouldered close to him and looked over the panel. There was a screen listing the ID transponder codes for a long list of ships in orbit.

"You might as well send it to all of them," she said. "The more people that see this the faster the fighting stops."

"So we hope," muttered Lessex.

"You're right," Ven nodded. "But without context it's just a recording. What do I say?"

"Say the truth. Say it's a recording of a BDF major buying weapons use to kill Pohl-Had-Narr."

"But we don't know that for certain."

She couldn't believe he was getting cold feet now. "It doesn't matter. We'll investigate the rest of it once the fighting stops and get the rest of the proof we need. We'll tie Brenner to the assassination and NRI can find out where this Pedric Cuf got his weapons. But we have to do this *now*."

"Okay," he nodded. "All right. I'll do it."

The young human reached up and flipped a switch. Two green lights lit up on the panel and he leaned close to a speaker grid.

"Attention all ships," he said, "This is Detective Aryon Ven of the Bavinyar Security Agency. The recording packaged with this transmission depicts the weapons used to kill Pohl-Had-Narr being purchased by Major Brenner of the BDF, assistant to General Harbin Kaice. I repeat, to all ships willing to listen, this recording is proof that rogue elements in the BDF were responsible for murdering Bavinyar's elected prime minister and starting this crisis."

He looked as Asyr, uncertain of what to say next.

She nudged him aside and spoke into the grille, saying, "All ships, this is... This is Asyr Sei'lar of New Republic Intelligence. I've been working with Detective Ven to uncover this information and I can guarantee what he's saying is true. This recording shows high-ranking BDF officers committing treason against their elected government. All BDF captains who are loyal to their planet, *not* General Kaice, should broadcast surrender notices immediately. I guarantee that you will not be fired upon.

"Once again, all ships should stand down. Once the fighting stops, Detective Ven and I will share all the information we've gained with any interested party. Those who were responsible for Pohl-Had-Narr's assassination *will* be held accountable. We promise this to *all* people of Bavinyar."

She couldn't think of a better way to end it. She killed the feed and set it to broadcast in a repeating loop.

All three of them stared at the lit-up panel for a long, long moment before Lessex asked, "Did it work? Is the fighting stopping?"

"I have no idea," Asyr admitted.

"Call the Republic flagship," Ven said. "See what's happening."

Asyr frowned at the list of transponder identifications. "I have no idea which that is," she admitted.

Suddenly another light lit up on the board, marking an incoming call. She stabbed the button beneath it and said, "This is Asyr Sei'lar."

It had been so long since she'd said that out loud; for so long she'd clung to false identities and hid behind false lives. It felt liberating, saying it now, finally.

The being on the other end didn't care about that. A gruff voice said, "This is the carrier *Intrepid* of the New Republic Fifth Fleet, General Etahn A'baht speaking. We've received your transmission."

"Have the BDF ships gotten it too?" asked Ven.

"I believe so. Several have already broadcast surren-der signals."

"Then it's over?" Asyr asked, breathless.

"Some ships seem intent on fighting, but most haven't declared one way or another and are trying to remove themselves from combat zones. There's also still fighting on the ground."

"We understand, General." Asyr spared a look over her shoulder at Cephalia's city lights down below. She'd heard airships flying overhead but in the dark she couldn't see smoke or signs of damage.

"We're located at the BSA transmission tower halfway up the west face of Cephalia's peak," said Ven. "Can you send a ride for us?"

"We'll get you a pickup," A'baht said. "Thank you for your work, both of you."

"Thank you, General," said Asyr. "I look forward to seeing you soon."

"Likewise," he said. The connection winked out.

Cool breeze washed across the mountainside. Then the air went still and silent. Lessex stepped up to Ven's other shoulder. Still clutching the rifle nervously to his chest, he asked, "Is that it? Is it finally over?"

"Over enough," Ven breathed. "We did our parts."

"Now we just wait for our ride to come." Asyr looked up at the stars. When A'baht's people picked them up she'd have a lot of explaining to do. For what she'd done- impersonating an NRI officer, among other things- she might end up penalized, even in jail. Yet she found she didn't care. After spending so long living a lie, the hard truth felt liberating.

She wondered how Gavin would react, when the truth all came out.

Then she wondered how *Fey'lya* would. That, at least, brought a smile to her face.

"What about my brother?" Lessex asked, voice suddenly cold. "Will we find him too?"

"Once this is over, I think we will." Ven put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry if it seems like we forgot Javen, but we didn't. I promise we'll find out what happened once Brenner and Kaice are arrested."

"And this Pedric Cuf?" asked Lessex. "Will you find him too?"

"NRI will devote all its resources to finding him," Asyr said.

"Really? So you'll guarantee you'll find them both?"

His voice had taken on a strange tone, almost taunting. Ven narrowed his eyes and asked, "Are you all right, Mr. Lessex?"

Lessex smiled a sickly smile. "You won't find Javen, Detective. You won't find Pedric Cuf either."

"What are you talking about?" Asyr tensed and lowered one paw to the pistol she'd stuck in her belt.

"You won't find them," Lessex repeated. "They don't exist."

Something in his face changed; the pupil of one eye seemed to split apart, and a burst of some black liquid spat from his dark socket into Aryon Ven's face. The detective let out a yelp and brought his head to his hands. Asyr pulled her pistol out from her belt but it was too late; Lessex flipped up his rifle with both hands and shot her once in the chest.

She fell back, vaguely aware that Ven hit the cold permacrete the same time she did. Hot pain spread out from the center of her chest; her vision swam and she tried to focus on the lights still blazing on the console above her. She heard the pang of another rifle-shot, probably into Ven, then saw darkness loom over her.

Every breath felt like fire. Rasping, she asked, "Who.... are.... you?"

The face bent low over hers was not that of Rev Lessex. It looked almost like a human skull, bereft of hair or nostrils, lips, or

hair. One eye gazed down and focused on hers; in place of the other was just a dark empty socket.

"You're lucky, you know," the creature said in Lessex's voice. "You won't get to see what comes next."

The world dissolved in darkness and hot pain. She didn't feel lucky at all.

Etahn A'baht stood at the front of *Intrepid's* command deck and watched as, one by one, the Bavinyari warships ceased to fire. At first only a few picket ships had veered away from the combat zone, but once the flagship began broadcasting a surrender notice, the others followed. Within four minutes, the remaining ships in the Bavinyari fleet had all turned off their guns.

A'baht should have felt better about that, but right now it was hard to feel good about anything. He went over to the comm station and asked them to hail the flagship again. This time, to his mild surprise, he got a response.

The head-and-shoulders holo-image of a human man appeared over the console and said, "General A'baht, I've ordered all our ships to stand down."

"They seem to have complied," A'baht said. "Was that broadcast from the planet convincing enough?"

"It... gave us pause, general." The human frowned, then added, "Just before that, we received a report from Cephalia. General Kaice was found dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. It... seems he was found in Prime Minister Syne's office. Kaice was killed instantly but the Prime Minister was still alive. She's been rushed to a medical center and is currently in critical care." After a pause he added, "It seems both had been shot by the same gun."

A'baht didn't know what that meant and in that moment didn't care. "Are you saying Syne is *alive*?"

"The last I heard. I've been getting only reports from the ground and things there are... confused."

"I can imagine."

The human swallowed "It seems Major Brenner has also, ah, confessed complicity in some of these actions. Things might become clearer soon."

The weight on A'baht's shoulders lifted a little more. "Thank you, Admiral, for calling the cease-fire. I assure you that whatever crimes Brenner or Kaice may have committed, they do not reflect poorly on you."

"Thank you, General," the human said, though from his shaking voice he didn't sound convinced.

"Stand by for further instructions," A'baht said, and killed the comm line. He marched back to the tactical station, where Morano and Corgan were standing.

"Well?" A'baht asked. "What's the final count?"

"Full casualty reports haven't come in yet, sir," Corgan said, "But given the starfighters and the one Corellian corvette, I'd say we lost at least one hundred beings."

"And the Bavinyari?"

"Rather higher, I imagine."

"Indeed," A'baht grunted. The fighting had been short but fierce, and though the Bavinyari were determined, they had simply been overwhelmed by superior numbers and superior hardware. One of their Carrack cruisers seemed to have been lost with all hands, while the entire forward section of their largest strike cruiser had been shattered by a missile barrage from a full squadron of K-wing bombers.

It was sickening to think that all those dead soldiers had been killed over some lie perpetrated by Kaice and Brenner, but A'baht did not regret his aggressive reaction against the Bavinyari blockade. He'd been certain they'd throw everything they had at him, and for the good of his own soldiers, he'd had no choice but to throw everything he had back.

"What about our teams on the ground?" he asked, "What do they report?"

"The Jedi have recovered Minister Behn-Kihl-Nahm," Morano reported. "No casualties from that team."

More good news. A'baht was tempted to think of this as a victory and had to remind himself otherwise. "What about the operation on Leonal?"

"We just got a call from Colonel Tevfik. He said the remaining CPF surrendered once they learned that Kaice and Syne were dead."

"And the hostages?"

"He reports sixty-three were recovered. As for those killed... He estimates around twenty."

Grim as it was, that could have been a lot worse. "All right. Send them any transports and medical teams they require."

"Already done, sir," said Corgan.

"Send another team to Cephalia. Put them at the disposal of the Bavinyari- whoever's in charge right now- for the express purpose of caring for Prime Minister Syne."

"Gladly."

As Corgan went to work, a young lieutenant slipped up to the tactical station and snapped all three officers a nervous salute.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant Karthy," Morano said.

"Yes, sir." Karthy lowered his hand to his side and looked a little anxiously at A'baht. "We just got word from the pickup team we sent to the Cephalia transmission station."

From his expression, it clearly hadn't gone to plan. "Well, Lieutenant?" asked A'baht.

"When the team arrived, they found four bodies. Two BDF guards, one human BSA officer, and one Bothan."

"The NRI agent," Corgan muttered.

"All dead?" asked Morano.

"Yes, sir. All shot in the chest or head."

"By whom?" asked A'baht.

Karthy shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, sir. They couldn't spot anyone else on the mountain with an aerial search, but it's still night on Cephalia."

"Well send a full team down to investigate at dawn," A'baht said, knowing it would be futile.

"Yes, sir," Karthy snapped another salute and scampered off.

A'baht breathed a very heavy sigh and leaned against the console. Neither Corgan nor Morano tried to disturb him. The flush of victory was gone. Whatever had happened with the BSA detective and NRI agent, they'd never know the whole story, which meant it would be even harder to bring everyone accountable for this fiasco to justice. That Brenner was arrested and Kaice dead didn't solve anything; even Jadesei Syne's survival would not recover any of the good beings who'd given their lives for the sake of peace on Bavinyar and stability in the Republic.

A'baht couldn't shake the knowledge that the ones who'd truly orchestrated this shadow war were still out there somewhere, and wherever they were, whatever their ultimate goals had been, they'd be forever a mystery.

It made what had happened here seem all the worse.

—CHAPTER SIXTEEN—

It took time to come back to life; Jadesei Syne couldn't say exactly how much. She remembered drifting through the formlessness of a bacta tank; before that was darkness. Gradually the last scene in her office returned to her. The pain of Kaice's betrayal hurt as much as the blaster shot to the stomach.

She remembered the Force had been with her as she'd shot him. Everything else was a blank.

After uncounted time she was removed from the bacta tank and placed in a bed. Hospitals all looked the same, but as she faded in and out of consciousness she marked the shapes of humans and cone-headed Cereans both, and that meant she was on Bavinyar.

What Bavinyar meant now, she had no idea. She only knew, with the most painful ache of all, that she had failed her world.

Syne had a lot of time to ruminate on that during her slow recovery. She was too weak to leave the bed but strong enough to stay awake when the doctor, a human, explained to her that General Kaice was dead and Major Brenner under investigation. New Republic peacekeepers had been deployed across Bavinyar after a short but violent skirmish in orbit. Naturally, the Republic wanted

to hear her side of the story, and in time she'd testify to what she knew.

With what little strength she currently had, Syne asked, "Who is in charge of the government?"

The doctor blinked owlshly and said, "You are, Madam Prime Minister."

Syne ruminated on that as she passed in and out of consciousness. Bacta and surgery had done all it could for her; according to the doctor her body needed time to heal.

They must have been keeping her under security, because for a half-dozen sleep-cycles her only visitor was the doctor and some em-dee droids. But one time (morning or evening she couldn't tell; there were no windows in her room) she awoke to find two figures standing at her bed, one on either side. She sat upright and rubbed her eyes to focus. One was a broad-bodied, aubergine-skinned Dornean. The other was a long-headed Cerean with a white beard and gentle eyes.

It took a long time for her to figure out what to say to them.

Eventually she managed, "I want to apologize, but words aren't enough."

Gently, Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, "Major Brenner has indicated you were *not* part of the conspiracy. You were a victim in this."

"I was a fool," she rasped.

"Perhaps. But you have plenty of company." The Cerean tried a smile; it looked very sad.

"I've been told that... I am still Prime Minister." She looked to A'baht. "Is this true?"

"The New Republic never sought to suborn Bavinyar's government, only keep the peace."

And to prove that, it seemed, they would leave her in power. She swallowed hard and said, "I can resign, if you'd like."

"I have... spoken on this subject with the Chief of State," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said. "We've agreed that continuity of government is Bavinyar's best chance of achieving stability."

So she was condemned to keep trying, after having failed so hard. Deflated, Syne leaned her head against the pillows and stared at the white ceiling. "I don't know where we can go from here."

"The Republic has already had success rounding up the BIL and CPF leadership," A'baht told her. "Disarming and dismantling the extremist groups is the first step. After that... the peoples of Bavinyar will have to decide their own fate."

"Peoples," Syne muttered. "Peoples apart."

"Perhaps," Behn-Kihl-Nahm said regretfully. "But Cereans and humans have to share this planet. There's no going back. Our only hope is to learn from our mistakes."

"Yes," she exhaled. Learn, and try to live up to the legacy she'd inherited.

No, another plural. *Legacies*. Her mother's legacy was still the more important and always would be, but perhaps her father's might serve her still, in some small way. After all, it had already saved her once. Without it she wouldn't be here now, with a second chance.

"I want you to know," said Behn-Kihl-Nahm, "That I will do everything I can to help rebuild Bavinyar."

"I appreciate that, Senator... but the election?"

"Still a few days away. I'll be leaving for Coruscant shortly to... make an end of it."

Another sad smile. She saw he had no confidence of winning now, and while she felt sorry for him, her found it hard to care about the state of Republic politics when her world was still bleeding.

Carefully, Behn-Kihl-Nahm said, "I think that, after my business on Coruscant has ended, I will return to Bavinyar. It *is* my homeworld, even if I've neglected it for so long. If I hadn't been so swept up in bigger drama..."

More regrets. There were always plenty of those to go around. Syne tilted her head down to look him in the eye. "I look forward to working with you, Senator, I really do."

"Please, call me Bennie," he said, and this time his smile was tinged with hope.

After the Bavinyar crisis passed its short, fiery climax, Iella Wessiri did her best to move on. She found it difficult, though, to slip back into the easy civilian life she'd been enjoying up until then. Syal and Myri were still Syal and Myri, at turns endearing and frustrating (Syal tended to the former, Myri the latter) while Wedge was also Wedge. He usually found himself drafted into some consulting job or another. Sometimes he'd remark that his retirement was less stressful than his wartime service but not, it often seemed, by much.

Whenever Wedge was away, whenever the kids were at school, she found herself waiting for some message pinned to her landspeeder windshield or even just a buzz on her comlink from the encrypted source she knew to be Asyr Sei'lar. It never came.

A few days before the New Republic Senate was set to vote on its next president, an event Iella and her husband were both anticipating with quiet dread ever since the Bavinyar crisis, she found herself getting dinner ready while Myri sulked in her room and Syal and Wedge sat in the living room; Wedge was scowling at the latest poll numbers that gave Borsk Fey'lya a clear advantage, while Syal watched her father like she was afraid he was going to go off like an unexploded torpedo.

Iella didn't notice the buzzing of her comlink, which she'd left on the counter, until her husband pointed it out. She dropped what she was doing and clasped the thing in both hands, somehow knowing this was what she'd been waiting for. She wondered what excuse she could have for chasing Wedge and Syal away so she could use the comm system in private; then she saw the incoming signal came not from Asyr, but someone else.

It was an audio-only signal, so Iella hurried into her bedroom and closed the door. She turned on the link and said, "This is Iella Wessiri. Who is this?"

After a tiny pause, the voice on the other end said, "My name is Tresk Im'nel."

She knew that name was belonging to one of the Jedi involved in the Bavinyar crisis. The media talking heads, though they argued about nearly everything else, had mostly agreed that the Jedi had performed to the best of their abilities at Bavinyar, and suggested

that Luke Skywalker be allowed to reform the Jedi Council that had been mooted during the presidential debates.

"Thank you for calling me. Can I ask how you got my comm frequency?"

Almost apologetically, Im'nel said, "I picked it up from the call logs on a personal link belonging to Asyr Sei'lar."

Iella sat down on the bed. Somehow, she'd known deep down it would come to this. "Is she dead?"

"I'm very sorry."

"So am I." Strangely, it felt like a pressure was being lifted off her. She'd been waiting for this call, or something like it, for weeks. Now, at last, it was finally done. "Do you know how she died?"

"It is... uncertain. Miss Antilles, how much do you know about the resolution of the Bavinyar crisis?"

"Only what I've heard on the news-nets, and a little from old friends in Intelligence, about the Prime Minister Syne and her top general shooting each other."

"That happened, and it helped end the fighting. However, all ships in orbit also received a last-minute broadcast from two people identifying themselves as a human BSA police detective and an NRI agent named Asyr Sei'lar."

Iella blinked. "She called herself that? By that name?"

Im'nel gave a dry chuckle. "Indeed. Perhaps, after coming so far, she knew her secret was out."

"Master Im'nel, I..."

"You helped Asyr. I know that. I did as well. She never said outright who was helping her, but when I reviewed her comm logs it became clear."

"You said Asyr helped stop the fighting. Then what happened to her?"

"That is still uncertain. When we sent down a team to the site of their transmission, we found four bodies, all shot dead. The speculation Asyr and the detective engaged in a firefight with two BDF guards, and all four were killed."

In initial wave of relief washed away, leaving Iella unsettled by a surge of guilt. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Asyr deserved so much better."

"Indeed. Yet she helped stop the fighting over Bavinyar. We must not forget that. In dying, she saved many lives."

"Master Im'nel.... Did she tell you why she wanted to get involved in Bavinyar in the first place?"

"I knew Asyr well. Our goals were the same."

The statement fell like a silent bomb between them. All Iella could mutter was, "Oh."

"We shall see how the election plays out," Im'nel continued, "But it must be admitted that she.... That *we* failed in our initial goal. Assuming there was even a chance of success; we still never found the missing link in the weapon supply chain, nor did we find who was selling Imperial weapons to the Cerean separatists."

"Still too many unknowns."

"It seems so. The investigation continues, of course."

"Of course," she echoed softly.

Silence buzzed over the comm line. Im'nel said, "You are not responsible for what happened to Asyr. She died because she pursued what she believed in to the very end. Even if she didn't accomplish her primary goal, she still died selflessly."

They were good words, and they were even true, but they didn't stop Iella from feeling tightness in her chest and water in her eyes.

"Thank you, Master Im'nel... If there's nothing else... I'd like to think about this for a while."

"Of course. If I anything else is learned about Asyr's fate, I will let you know."

"Thank you," she repeated, and closed the link.

She let herself fall back on her bed. She stared up at the dim ceiling of the home she and Wedge had made and wondered if Asyr had ever had a ceiling this familiar, had ever had a home at all.

She didn't know how long she'd been laying there, too empty and exhausted and sad to even think, when Wedge knocked and asked through the door, "Are you all right in there?"

"I'm fine," she said, but it came out like a choke and she still didn't have the strength to sit up.

The door slid open. Wedge poked his head through and looked at her. She fumbled up on her elbow and then into a sitting position.

"Tella, what's wrong?" he asked, looking down at her.

"Nothing. I'm fine." She looked away.

"Are you sure? Were you crying?"

"No, I wasn't..." She pawed wetness away from her eyes. "Wedge, it's nothing, I..."

But Asyr wasn't nothing. She looked up at him, saw the deep concern in his eyes. She reached out and took his hand, lowering him onto the bed beside her.

"I want to tell you something." She squeezed his hand. "About a very good friend..."

Leonia Tavira had been planning and waiting for the New Republic presidential election for months, and now that it was finally here she should have been overjoyed. Sitting in her cabin aboard *Invidious* with an open bottle of fine Tralian whiskey and access to every news network imaginable, she should have been basking in victory. After everything she'd done- selling weapons to the BIL and CPF both, helping Pwoe destabilize the election then forcing him to quit, cutting a deal with the Besadii to cover her tracks, and of course registering early bets with virtually every casino and gambling host in the known galaxy, the electoral triumph of Borsk Fey'lya was her triumph all the more. The amount of ways the conniving Bothan could wreck the Republic were too numerous to count.

Yet as she sat there on her sofa sipping her whiskey and watching the results roll in, all she could think about was the man sitting next to her.

Pedric Cuf had commed *Invidious* less than a standard day earlier, requesting to meet up with Tavira's ship and enjoy the election results with her. By then Tavira had figured out that whoever Pedric was, he wasn't actually a high-ranking BIL member.

The very fact that he'd been lying to her and pulling some con for his own agenda made her at once furious and curious, so she decided to let Pedric Cuf aboard, and *then* find out what his real game was, through any means necessary.

When he arrived, Pedric acted very genial and upbeat for a man whose terrorist organization was being dismembered by a mix of Republic and Bavinyari military and police teams. Aviran Kolin, the BIL's supposed leader who'd done nothing during the entire crisis, had finally been found holding out on a tiny island near the planet's south pole and was being arraigned for legal processing, but when Tavira mentioned that Pedric had just shrugged, as if to say, 'these things happen.'

What he really seemed to enjoy was sitting on the sofa with Tavira, sharing her whiskey and watching the votes tally up. Some networks called for Fey'lya early on. Others waited until it was clear the Bothan would take nearly-two thirds of the total vote, while former front-runner Behn-Kihl-Nahm ended up almost splitting the remains with third-in-line Celch Dravvad.

It was all a show she should have enjoyed but couldn't, and all because Pedric Cuf was there beside her: a question begging to be answered.

She'd wanted Pedric to feel comfortable at first, so she'd left her blaster in one corner of the room and kept only a poison-tipped stiletto knife in a sealed sheath inside her right boot. When she couldn't take the waiting anymore, she curled that leg up on the sofa and rested her right hand on the tip of the boot while leaning in closer to the man.

"Tell me," she said whispered playfully in his ear, "Have you gotten what you wanted in all this, Pedric?"

"Haven't I, my dear Leonia?" He said it with a smile, but something in his tone was faintly mocking.

"Very much so." She slipped two fingers into her boot, squeezing the tip of the stiletto between them. "I was wondering why *you* would look so happy, considering the fate of the BIL."

"Ah, the BIL." He shrugged. "It is a shame, isn't it?"

"I'm just a gunrunner. I never had any attachment to the BIL. I thought you did. You *are* from Bavinyar, and a close friend to Kolin, aren't you?"

Pedric blinked. Tavira pulled the blade out from her boot and instantly brought it up against Pedric's neck.

He bore his teeth and hissed angrily, "I was wondering when we'd get to his part."

"You were never BIL and you're not from Bavinyar," she said. "I know that."

"Heard that from your CPF customers, did you?"

She tried to keep the surprise from her face. "That doesn't matter. Why did you come back, Pedric? If you wanted to run as another middle-man and make yourself a little more profit, I could have accommodated. I could have even cut you into the CPF sales."

"That wouldn't have done, I'm afraid. I had a role to fill, just like you."

His voice dripped condescension and made her angry. "What role? I've heard how the BDF and General Kaice killed Pohl-Had-Narr. Did they hire you? Is that what this is about?"

He actually laughed, even with a knife at his neck. "The BDF was just playing a role too. Everyone was."

"If you don't tell me who you are now, I'll kill you." She edged the blade a little closer.

"This may be very hard for you to believe."

"Tell me!" she snapped.

He gave a labored, overdramatic sigh and leaned back a little. "May I show you something?"

"No. Just tell me."

He shook his head like she was a stupid schoolgirl. Then something happened to his right eye. His pupil went so wide his entire socket was consumed with empty darkness.

Tavira jumped back, off the sofa and into the middle of the room, just as some squirt of dark liquid arced past his shoulder. She scrambled to the far wall and grabbed her hold-out pistol. Pedric Cuf was on his feet now, his one eye still empty, grinning at her as he held his hands in the air. The newscaster on the holo-projector

droned on about Fey'lya's victory; Tavira reached out with one hand and turned it off, keeping his pistol level on Pedric at all times.

"All right," Tavira said, "*Show* me."

"It will be my pleasure." Pedric Cuf reached with one hand to the back of his neck. His face crinkled in a wince-

-then his skin itself seemed to strip away. A split appeared, running from scalp to chin, then both sides peeled back and disappeared down the neck of his tunic, revealing an ash-gray face like a human skull, devoid of nostrils or ears. His lips bore teeth that seemed to perpetually grin and dark tattoos swirled around his hairless scalp.

Leonia Tavira had traveled the galaxy far and wide, but had never seen an alien this that.

"What are you?" she gasped and steadied her shaking pistol with another hand.

"My *real* name is Nom Anor." He spread his arms, still grinning. "And I came back to offer a business proposition that should be most enticing to an entrepreneurial woman like yourself."

"You lie to me, trick me, and *now* you want to be *partners*?"

Nom Anor chuckled softly. "*Partners* is probably not the correct term. But you can serve the same master I do... for appreciable compensation."

"What kind of compensation? What *are* you?"

"I'll explain all of that if you just lower your weapon."

"I should shoot you right here, you *thing*."

He laughed that condescending laugh. "No, you won't. You do have a temper, lovely Leonia, but you're too smart, and too practical, to waste what I'm offering just because our previous relationship was less than honest."

"Less than honest?"

"That's right. I don't see why you're so angry. Our relationship-call it what you will- has been fruitful ever since I sold you *Intimidator's* location two years ago."

"But that was-"

"I was wearing a different face then," he said casually. "The point, you got everything you wanted and now you'll get more than you could have ever imagined. I should think you'd be overjoyed."

She lowered the pistol just a bit, so it was aimed at his chest rather than his head. "What did *you* want from all this? To destabilize the Republic?"

"Exactly. My masters decided, quite wisely, that having Borsk Fey'lya governing the galaxy instead of Behn-Kihl-Nahm would give us quite the advantage when our time came."

"Your *time*? Who *are* you people?" A thought jarred her. "*Intimidator*... What happened to it? Who wrecked it?"

"I think you've already figured that one out."

"It was a super star destroyer! It would take a whole fleet to destroy that ship."

"I know. It did."

Tavira's shock gave way to awe, and then to fear. She realized the weapon in her hand meant nothing at all against the power this creature stood for, and she let it fall to her side.

Nom Anor lowered his arms and smiled. "You told me peace is bad for business once. With that in mind, I think we should have a seat and begin a new discussion. Because I assure you, business is going to be very good for you very soon."

The gathering in the Solo family apartment watched in grim silence as the final votes were tallied. Leia had resigned herself to seeing Fey'lya win the election, but the sheer scale of his victory, with almost twice as many votes as Bennie and Dravvad combined, left her oscillating between despair and anger. Even senators whose judgment she'd always trusted were casting votes for him, leaving ones like Avan Beruss, Cal Omas, and Elegos A'kla looking like stubborn hold-outs.

"You know, it might not be so bad," Han said from the sofa beside her. "If there's good people on the Advisory Council, they might rein the furball in."

Han had always been the one to voice aloud the complaints Leia kept diplomatically quiet about, and she knew he was just

trying to salvage her mood. A valiant effort, but nothing would do that right now.

"Do you know what Behn-Kihl-Nahm is going to do now?" asked her brother. Luke was seated in the chair next to them, leaning forward so his dark Jedi robe shrouded his shoulders.

"I talked to him. He'd already planned to resign his office and go back to Bavinyar to help rebuild."

"I figure Syne'll need all the help she can get," Han said.

Leia's heart shuddered at the mention of the woman who'd reminded her so much of herself, only to end up as a pawn in someone else's political game.

In sad truth, that, too, reminded her of herself right now.

"I don't know what Bennie wants right now," Leia sighed. "I don't think he does either. He seems to blame himself for all this. He thinks he abandoned Bavinyar by spending too much time on Coruscant. He tried to work for both worlds and ended up working for none."

"So now we're stuck with Fey'lya," Jacen spoke up for the first time in a while. Her son had been sitting cross-legged on the floor in the corner of the room, watching the results come in with a look of consternation.

"I'm starting to think I should have never quit politics," Leia admitted.

"Hey, there's still good people in the senate," Han interjected, fake-cheerful again. "We can trust guys like Triebakk or Elegos."

"I know, Han, I know. It's just that when we made peace with the Imperial Remnant it felt like the future was secure. Now... Everything feels so uncertain."

He put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "Well, no matter what, it can't be any worse than the Empire. I mean, Fey'lya's a slimy little furball, but he's no Palpatine, right?"

"No," Leia admitted, "He's definitely no Palpatine."

"Then cheer up." He kissed her forehead. "Whatever happens we'll get through this together."

She knew he was right, but she couldn't kill the unease growing inside her. She rested her head on Han's shoulder, closed her eyes,

and listened to the news-casters drone on and on, predicting the shape of things to come.

A SHORT GUIDE TO ABBREVIATIONS

BDF = Bavinyar Defense Force, human-led planetary armed forces

BIL = Bavinyar Independence League, Bavinyari human separatists

BSA = Bavinyar Security Agency, Cerean-led planetary police force

CPF = Cerean Patriotic Front, Bavinyari Cerean separatists

NRDF = New Republic Defense Force

NRI = New Republic Intelligence

About the Author

Gregory O. Scott is a pen name for fan fiction writer HandofThrawn45. When Disney rebooted the Expanded Universe in 2014, it brought about the official end of the Star Wars Legends continuity. Yet while no official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.

About the Type

This book was set in Minion, a 1990 Adobe Originals typeface by Robert Slimbach (b. 1956). Minion is inspired by classical, old-style typefaces of the late Renaissance, a period of elegant, beautiful, and highly readable type designs. Created primarily for text setting, Minion combines the aesthetic and functional qualities that make text type highly readable with the versatility of digital technology.